

SOCIAL ECOLOGY, ECOJUSTICE, AND
THE NEW TESTAMENT: LIBERATING READINGS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Division of Religion
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ABSTRACT

Social Ecology, Ecojustice and the New Testament: Liberating readings.

Ph. D. Dissertation by

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Our planet Earth is going through an unprecedented crisis. The current ecological predicament is such that has the potential to annihilate life as we know it today. It is a global phenomenon that concerns every human being and even the whole creation itself. The international community and many organizations have issued persistent calls to change habits and behaviors as well as the basic organizational pattern of societies to make this world sustainable for future generations.

Social ecology is one of the secular disciplines that tries to understand the reasons why we have reached this point as well as suggests new ways to overcome the crisis. Ecojustice is a concern that women and men of faith articulate in order to find in the sources of their own religious traditions guiding principles and resources to confront the current world situation. In this context, people of faith ask whether the Bible has anything to say or contribute to this particular situation. Through history, the Bible has been used, misused, and abused to justify almost anything, even the worst evils humanity has ever known, such as wars, slavery, racism, patriarchy, colonization, marginalization, and exploitation. Nevertheless, the Bible, as witness of the story of God's good creation and of the pilgrimage of God's people, has also been seen by many as providing a critical contribution to justice and peace and to the

people's commitment to safeguard God's creation. This dissertation reads selected New Testament texts--The Gospel of Mark, the letter to the Romans, and the Book of Revelation--using the key tenets of Social Ecology and ecojustice as a basic hermeneutical framework. It deals with three different genres--gospel, letter, and apocalypse--and suggests liberating readings that can inspire and sustain people's commitment in the struggle to build a sustainable and more humane society, based on justice and peace for all God's creatures.

To SUSANA, loving life-companion and wife.

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INTRODUCTION

A human being who is content with the world will not have the least interest in unmasking the mechanisms that conceal the authentic reality.

Juan Luis Segundo ¹

A growing awareness

The critical ecological predicament of planet Earth is becoming more and more evident. The daily life experiences of peoples, national and international conferences, meetings, books, articles, and even popular films, such as *An Inconvenient Truth* featuring former USA Vice-President Al Gore, have brought to the forefront the rather grim reality to most of the inhabitants of the planet. That is, Planet Earth is in deep crisis. It has become simply unsustainable. We are witnessing a devastating trend: Humanity encroaching into the ecosystem in a way unparalleled hitherto.

Nevertheless, a growing and steady concern is catching the imagination of many people around the world today.² Even the powerful advertisement

¹ *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976), 10.

industry has found that appealing to those who have acquired a certain “green” awareness is good business.³ There is also a growing awareness of the complexities and interrelatedness of the various issues that have to do with life on the planet. Ecological devastations and imbalances and the question of peace seems to be linked more and more.⁴ Poverty and economic injustices are closely linked to the ruthless destruction of the environment and climate change.⁵ The Ecumenical Program on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation clearly developed the interrelatedness of the issues, and the need to work in coordination on all the fronts that threat life on planet Earth.⁶

² An example of this *concientization* process is the story carried by the Spanish newspaper, *El País*. It reported about a national survey conducted by the BBVA (Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria) Foundation that showed that 91% of the persons consulted have heard about climate change, that 86% agree to the fact that human activity is behind this global phenomenon, 82% believe that global warming is *already* a problem for them or for their families, and 93% think that it will also be a problem for future generations. See www.elpais.com. February 6, 2009.

³ See *inter alia*, the examples of Exxon and GM mentioned in Thomas Friedman’s *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution—And How It can Renew America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroud, 2008), 205-06. According to Wikipedia, the advertisement industry will exceed 450 billion dollars in 2010.

⁴ The fact that in recent years the Nobel Peace Prize committee decided to honor two persons/groups concerned with ecology is a clear indication of these close interrelationships. The Kenyan environmental and political activist, founder of the *Green Belt Movement*, Dr. Wangari Muta Maatai, was the first African woman to receive such an award in 2004. Three years later, in 2007, Al Gore and the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC) shared the honor.

⁵ The Argentinean newspaper, *Clarín*, reports a statement made by Nobel Economics laureate, Joseph Stiglitz, regarding this relationship: “*tenemos que trabajar contra la pobreza y el cambio climático al mismo tiempo.*” (We need to work against poverty and climate change simultaneously.) English translation mine. See <http://clarin.com/suplementos/zone/2009/11/01z-0203241.htm>. Furthermore, Pulitzer winner, Thomas Friedman, strongly argues for the need to develop both sustainable environmental and sustainable financial/economic policies at the same time. See, *Hot, Flat and Crowded*. From a more theological perspective, see Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon, 1994).

⁶ See Preman Niles, *Resisting the Threats to Life: Covenanting for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989). The entire

Recent history of the reactions of the world community *vis-à-vis* the Earth's ecological predicament

At least since the second half of the twentieth century, the world community has been conscious of the serious difficulties encountered in the relationships between human beings and the environment. At the global level it is important to mention the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment which took place in Stockholm, Sweden, 5-16 June, 1972. It was the first world meeting devoted to questions pertaining to the environment. On February 12, 1980, an important Report was presented to the General Secretary of the United Nations (UN), entitled *North-South: A Program for Survival. The Report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues under the Chairmanship of Willy Brandt*. In the summary of the recommendations the Report states, *inter alia*, that: "All nations have to cooperate more urgently in international management of the atmosphere and other global commons, and in the prevention of irreversible ecological damage."⁷

The United Nations later brought into focus the urgency of the ecological predicament through the Report of the World Commission on Environment

volume of *The Ecumenical Review*, Volume 41, no.4, (1989) is dedicated to the issues of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. Also, Preman Niles, Compiler, *Between the Flood and the Rainbow: Interpreting the Conciliar Process of Mutual Commitment (Covenant) to Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1992) and Carlos Sintado, "The Process of Mutual Commitment (Covenant) to Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation" (S. T. M. Thesis, Drew University, 2001).

⁷ *North-South: A Program for Survival. The Report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues under the Chairmanship of Willy Brandt* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1981), 283-284.

and Development, chaired by the then Prime Minister of Norway, Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland.⁸ Furthermore, twenty years after the Stockholm conference --in 1992-- the world community, through its representatives, was invited to the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Ten years later, The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) took place just outside of the city of Johannesburg, South Africa, from August 26 to September 4, 2002. The WSSD was fundamentally given the task to hold a ten-year review of the Rio's UNCED. In December 2009, the World Community gathered again in Copenhagen, Denmark, for the World Summit on Climate Change (WCCC).

Since 1984, the Worldwatch Institute has published annually the *State of the World, a Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society*. Each annual report covers a vast array of problems that have the potential to threaten the future of the environment and of humankind, itself. They have been critical instruments to help raise awareness of problematic issues offering avenues for discussion and action.

Other international institutions and organizations have also called attention to some of the fundamental problems faced by large sectors of the world's population, such as hunger, unemployment, social marginalization and exclusion, the lack of basic sanitation and health care. For some, one of the cruellest realities of late global capitalism is the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor, both between nations and inside nations. This entails

⁸ *Our Common Future: World Commission on Environment and Development* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press), 1987.

devastating consequences for millions of people. Current patterns of the resource consumption across the world are alarming: less than 20% of world population consume over 80% of the available resources. It is evident that the world today is characterized by the pervasive presence of inequalities and injustices.

Ecology and the Bible: A brief history of the research

Social scientists and theologians from different traditions were among the first to pay attention to the need for a new understanding of the relationship between humans beings and the world -- God's gift of creation-- in light of new data and scientific developments. Biblical scholars followed suit and focused with renewed energy on the witness of the Scriptures.

Biblical reflections and studies on ecological matters are relatively new. Bakken, Engel and Engel argue that "... in 1960, few persons, Christian or non-Christian, considered Christianity to have anything substantive, or positive, to contribute to the environmental issues that were pressing themselves upon public consciousness, or believed that the environment was an essential ingredient in Christian commitment to justice and peace."⁹ In 1967, an influential and controversial article by US historian, Lynn White Jr., --a Presbyterian layperson-- was published in the journal, *Science*.¹⁰ Now a classic, the paper triggered a significant debate on the role of religion and its influence on the way people interact with the environment. Since then, a remarkable number of studies have engaged the issue. Many of them

⁹ "Foreword" to Peter Balken, Joan G. Engel and J. Ronald Engel, *Ecology, Justice and Christian Faith: A Critical Guide to the Literature* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1995), 3

¹⁰ Lynn White, Jr. "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science*, Vol. 155, no. 3767, (1967): 1203-1207.

have focused on the Hebrew Bible and its witness to God's creation, epitomized in texts such as Genesis 1 and 2; Isaiah 11; 35; 24: 1-13; 40-55; the Wisdom Traditions, and the Psalms. Research around the issue of the land and of the meaning and insights of the Jubilee (Leviticus 25) contributed to the rediscovery of the holistic perspective of the Hebrew Bible.¹¹ Selected New Testament texts were studied in light of the new ecological predicament, particularly the Gospels and the Pauline letters, notably the letters to the Romans and Corinthians, and the Deutero-Pauline literature of Colossians and Ephesians, as well as the book of Revelation.¹² The challenge was

¹¹ See *inter alia*, Bernard Anderson, "Creation and Ecology," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, vol. 4 no 1 (1983): 14-30; Walter Bruggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1997); David J.A. Clines, *The Bible and the Future of the Planet: An Ecology Reader* (Sheffield : Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); Theodore Hiebert, *The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996); Ulrich Duchrow and Gerhard Liedke, *Shalom: Biblical Perspectives on Creation, Justice and Peace* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989); Haroldo Reamer, "Espiritualidad Ecológica en los Salmos," *Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana* 45/2 (2003): 106-117; Hans Ucko, ed., *The Jubilee Challenge: Utopia or Possibility? Jewish and Christian Insights* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997); Gene M. Tucker, "Rain on a Land Where no One Lives: The Hebrew Bible and the Environment," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 116/1 (1997): 3-17.

¹² See *inter alia* Richard Bauckmann "Jesus and the Wild Animals (Mark 1:13): A Christological Image for an Ecological Age," in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ. Essays on the Historical Jesus and the New Testament*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 3-21; Calvin B. DeWitt, *The Environment and the Christian: What Can We Learn from the New Testament?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991); George H. Kehm, "The New Story: Redemption as Fulfillment of Creation," in *After Nature's Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1992), 89-106; Jey J. Kanagaraj, "Ecological Concern in Paul's Theology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 70 (1998): 291-309; David Rhoads, "Reading the New Testament in the Environmental Age," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 24 (June 1997): 259-266; Walter Wink, "Ecobible: The Bible and Eco-justice," *Theology Today* 49 (January 1993): 465-477, and the following issues of RIBLA (*Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana*): "Apocalíptica: Esperanza de los Pobres," 7 (1990), and "Toda la Creación Gime...", 21 (1995). See also Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2004); and idem, *The Choice between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1999). See among others,

launched again in June 1992. In preparation for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also called the “Earth Summit,” a major ecumenical gathering was convened by the World Council of Churches in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The theme of the meeting was “Searching for the New Heavens and the New Earth: An Ecumenical Response to UNCED.”¹³ Among the recommendations made to the churches by the gathering one can find the following: “Re-read the Bible and reinterpret our traditions in light of the ecological crisis.”¹⁴ It is yet another example of the phenomenon that Krister Stendhal once described as follows: “... the ancient Scripture is rejuvenated in the modern world.”¹⁵

A new departure

Bernhard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); James Barr, “Man and Nature: The Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 52 (1972): 9-32; Theodore Hiebert, *The Yahwist’s Landcape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); idem, *Using God’s Resources Wisely: Isaiah and Urban Possibility* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993); Ulrich Duchrow and Gerhard Liedke, *Shalom: Biblical Perspectives on Justice and Peace*; Ronald D. Simkis, *Creator and Creation: Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publications, 1994); Richard H. Hiers, “Reverence for Life and Environmental Ethics in Biblical Law and Covenant,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 13 (1996-1998): 127-188; Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), especially Part II, chapters 4 -7; Gene McAfee, “Ecology and Biblical Studies,” in *Theology for Earth Community: A Field Guide*, 31-44; Diana Jacobson, “Biblical Basis for Eco-Justice Ethics,” in *ibid.*, 45-52. See also the extensive bibliography in *ibid.*, 269-292, and Balken, Engel and Engel, *Ecology, Justice and Christian Faith: A Critical Guide to the Literature*, particularly Bibliographic Survey 2, “Biblical Interpretation”, 49-58.

¹³ A full account of the gathering together with its major decisions as well as the full text of the UNCED Rio Declaration can be found in Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *Redeeming the Creation--The Rio Earth Summit: Challenges for the Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1992).

¹⁴ See Appendix 3, “Theology.” *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁵ Krister Stendhal, “Ancient Scripture in the Modern World,” in *Scripture in the Jewish and Christian Traditions: Authority, Interpretation, Relevance*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 214.

Readings from the Perspective of the Earth is more than just the title of a book.¹⁶ It is a program for a new hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures carried out by *The Earth Bible Project*. The adherents of the project are aware of the heritage of anthropocentric, patriarchal, and androcentric approaches to the reading of the texts and the ensuing devaluation of the Earth. Furthermore, they are conscious that human beings are an integral part of today's endangered Earth community. They see "the need to take up the cause of justice for Earth to ascertain whether Earth and the Earth community are oppressed, silenced or liberated in the biblical text."¹⁷

The project has established six ecojustice principles which contributors to the project apply to read the biblical texts from the perspective of the Earth.¹⁸ It is to be recognized that the Earth Bible project represents a real breakthrough in an ecological reading of the Bible. Nevertheless, most of the authors--consciously or unconsciously--do not go far enough. They fall short of taking a more "systemic" analysis of the discrete economic system that supports the prevailing predicament (currently, the globalized capitalist system). Nor do they pay attention to its concrete ecological and economic consequences for the earth and for the majority of the people. Furthermore, they seem to lack insights concerning concrete political and organizational tools and strategies to confront oppression and marginalization in the current socio political and economic realities. While recognizing their particular and important

¹⁶ Norman C. Habel, ed., *Readings from the Perspective of the Earth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

¹⁷ Idem, "Introducing the Earth Bible," in Ibid., 37.

¹⁸ Ibid., 24; and "Guiding Ecojustice Principles," in Ibid., 38-53. The principles are listed in chapter two of this dissertation.

contribution, it seems to me that there are some dimensions and perspectives that are missing or not sufficiently developed or integrated in their work. One gets the impression that, apart from some basic general references to the present situation, the authors remain with their conclusions in the first century CE. Using the felicitous expression of Juan Luis Segundo, the well-known Uruguayan theologian, the hermeneutic circle has not been realized.¹⁹

The subject of this dissertation

It is the assumption of this study that a Social Ecology/ecojustice-based framework may provide the perspective that would help to complete the analysis and bridge the gap. Therefore, it is in this context that the contribution of this present study is to be seen. I believe that Social Ecology/ecojustice offer a wider and more comprehensive perspective for reading the selected biblical texts than those offered so far by the *Earth Bible Project*. The close interconnections that exist between ecology, economics, and political organization, and the highlighting of the systemic and socioeconomic roots of today's ecological predicament from the perspective of the poor, are particular and significant contributions that the Latin American version of Social Ecology --as presented in this study-- can provide. Thus, this dissertation intends to go beyond the work of the *Earth Bible Project* in trying to read texts in a more integrated way where politics, economics, ecology, and the struggle for justice are intertwined and interconnected, and where the issue is analyzed and discussed in an interdisciplinary manner with proposals suggested from an interdisciplinary perspective.

¹⁹ See Juan Luis Segundo, "The Hermeneutic Circle," in *Third World Liberation Theologies*, ed. Deane William Ferm (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1986), 64ff.

John Theilmann defines Social Ecology as “... a philosophical movement whose adherents believe that the domination of nature by humans is derived from the domination of human society by the capitalist mode of production.” Furthermore, he adds, “it aims to achieve an ecosystem in which humans and the rest of the natural world live in harmony in a nonexploitative setting... [social ecology] provides a trenchant criticism of modern society.”²⁰ Murray Bookchin, a USA- born scholar and social activist, is considered the father of the discipline. He has made outstanding contributions to the field and his work is a landmark in this critical discussion. The reflections of Uruguayan scholar, Eduardo Gudynas, represent an important critical development and a particular Latin American contextualization of social ecology.

Ecojustice can be understood as a significant theological and ethical contribution from a faith perspective, and in many ways, runs parallel to and stands in tension with social ecology. US scholars Hessel and Ruether argue that in ecojustice theology -- a terminology that has been in use since the early 70s-- “the plight of the earth and of the people, particularly the most abused, are seen together.” This is so in their opinion, because “eco-justice provides a dynamic framework for thought and action that fosters ecological integrity with social-economic justice.”²¹ In this sense, social justice and ecology are inextricably linked. Brazilian liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, eloquently

²⁰ “Social Ecology,” in *The Encyclopedia of Environmental Issues*, ed. Craig W. Allin (Pasadena, California: Salem Press, 2000), Vol.III, 682.

²¹ Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed., *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), xxxvi.

combines these two concerns in the well-chosen title of his book, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*.²²

In the light of these considerations, this dissertation is an attempt to contribute to the growing body of scholarly criticism in the area of biblical studies by its contribution of a new and more comprehensive framework for reading selected New Testament texts from an interdisciplinary perspective. The proposed hermeneutic framework combines both the insights of social ecology and ecojustice. In this project, I argue that the texts are read to acquire a new significance such that they will become resources to enable and guide people in their commitment to the struggle for justice, both for the people and for all creation. The texts selected belong to three different New Testament genres: gospel, letter, and apocalypse.

Furthermore, and in a reverse manner, one can start to ask some key questions concerning the interrelationships between the texts studied and the particular hermenetical lens used. These questions may be valid regardless the method or the hermeneutical frame that a reader may choose. For example: Do the hermeneutical principles exhaust the meaning of the biblical texts? Specifically, how do the texts studied in this dissertation engage, in turn, social ecology and ecojustice? Have they something to offer in exchange? Do they just legitimize the eight principles as “proof texts,” or do they bring more to the table that social ecology/ecojustice can provide? Can we perceive something of our own situation in these texts, even, as it were, “in a mirror,

²² Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Philip Berryman (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997).

dimly” (*di’ esoptrou en ainigmati*) (I Cor. 13: 12). Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) was both fascinated with and fearful of mirrors. In many of his stories Borges repudiates mirrors simply because of their ability to reproduce reality. Is a “mirrored” response from the texts to the hermeneutical framework possible? Do they reproduce reality and have the capacity of refining and expanding the transformative vision enshrined in social ecology/ecojustice? Can one address the reversal of the process in a mutually challenging way? Swiss scholar, Hans-Ruedi Weber entitled one of his books *The Book that Reads Me*. It is obvious that he was referring to the Bible. In fact, this rather brief text is a handbook for Bible study enablers. Weber informs his readers about the title of the handbook, which reflects a story told in East Africa:

A village woman used to walk around always carrying her Bible. “Why always the Bible?” her neighbors asked teasingly. “There are other books you could read.” The woman knelt down, held the Bible high above her head and said, “Yes, of course there are many books which I could read. But here is only one book which reads me.”²³

In his study, Weber is opening the way in order that “a reversal of roles can take place.”²⁴ I am suggesting that such a reversal is also possible in my application of the social ecology/ecojustice principles to the biblical texts.

Methodology

²³ Hans-Ruedi Weber, *The Book that Reads Me* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), ix.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, x.

I start with the premise that there are multiple possibilities of reading the Bible. Every interpreter/reader reads it from his/her own place,²⁵ from and within his/her own particular social location.²⁶ Therefore, there is not such a thing as a neutral reading of the Bible. All readings are contextualized and carry with them a particular perspective. As Uruguayan theologian, Juan Luis Segundo, claims, “[E]very hermeneutic entails conscious or unconscious partisanship ... Partiality is not in itself inimical to universality.”²⁷ A key question is to recognize this fact and to be explicitly conscious of its possibilities and limitations. Texts can be read and studied using different reading strategies or exegetical lenses. Biblical texts are no exceptions. A look at the history of the interpretation and reception of the texts provides a clear example of this phenomenon. This polytonality, this plurality of viewpoints, mutually questions principles of interpretations, diverse methods, and hermeneutical frameworks as well as enriches and challenges the text itself and, in turn, may be challenged by the texts in question. US feminist/liberationist scholar, Schuessler Fiorenza, strongly critiques readings

²⁵ See the two volumes edited by Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*. Vol .1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); and *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*. Vol.2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

²⁶ I agree here with the description that Teresa Okure provides of social locations. She claims that “[T]he total reality of these social locations includes culture, language, politics, economics, worldview, faith/creed, though patterns, value systems, and geography, as well as such foundational locations as sex, race, and class.” “Reading from this Place: Some Problems and Prospects,” in *Ibid.* Vol. 2, 52.

²⁷ Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 25.

that can be used to “deny the ideological character... and mask its historical-social location and interests.”²⁸ Moreover, she claims that

Competing interpretations are not simply either right or wrong, but they constitute different ways of reading and constructing socio-historical and theo-ethical meaning. What is appropriate in such a rhetorical paradigm of biblical scholarship is not detached value-neutrality, but an explicit articulation of one’s rhetorical strategies, interested perspectives, ethical criteria, theoretical frameworks, religious presuppositions, and sociopolitical locations for critical public discussion.²⁹

I consider myself as belonging to a relatively new tradition of doing theology, known as Latin American liberation theology. Such a theological undertaking includes a liberation hermeneutics, which Fernando Segovia describes as “the interpretation of biblical and related texts from a self-conscious perspective and program of social transformation.”³⁰ In choosing to work with Social Ecology as a discipline, the program of social and political transformation becomes self-evident. As the editors of *The Postmodern Bible Reader* argue, “any act of reading/interpreting is a political act, one which has consequences in the world.”³¹ I would like at this juncture to mention that such a program receives its driving force from the perspective and the interests of the poor and the oppressed.³²

²⁸ Elizabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*. Proclamation Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 15.

²⁹ Ibid., 3.

³⁰ See Fernando Segovia, “Reading the Bible Ideologically: Socioeconomic Criticism,” in *To Each its Own Meaning*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 283.

³¹ David Jobling, Tina Pippin, and Ronald Schleifer, ed., *The Postmodern Bible Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 169.

³² For a fuller description of this particular way of reading, see *inter alia*, J. Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading in the Production of Meaning* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988); Clodovis Boof, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books,

Peruvian theologian and priest, Gustavo Gutierrez, considered as one of the fathers of liberation theology, argues that “A preferential commitment to the poor is at the very heart of Jesus’ preaching of the Reign of God.”³³ Nevertheless, he adds that “the very term *preference* obviously precludes any exclusivity; it simply points to who ought to be the first -- not the only—objects of our solidarity.”³⁴ By poor, I understand, *inter alia*, both women and men, the materially poor, such as the exploited workers, the underemployed or the unemployed, the landless peasants and seasonal migrant workers, the marginalized, and the excluded. The poor also include the persons discriminated against on the basis of their gender, race, ethnicity, different abilities, sexual orientation, culture, and age.³⁵ Enrique Dussel, the Argentinean philosopher, argues that the poor “are those who, in the *relation of domination*, are the dominated, the instrumentalized, the alienated.”³⁶

1987), and José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), particularly chapter 5, “Hermeneutics, Truth, and Praxis.” Uruguayan scholar Eduardo Gudynas is the social ecologist who better developed this perspective from within the Social Ecology mainstream.

³³ See Gustavo Gutierrez, “Option for the Poor,” in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 22.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁵ See Clodovis Boff and Leonardo Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987). Marcela Althaus-Reid, in turn, considers that the excluded are not the poor, they are “those who are outside... for whom to be exploited would be a dubious but real privilege.” See “Hermeneutics of Transgression,” in *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: A Clash of Socio-Economic and Cultural Paradigms*, ed. G. de Schrijver (Leuven: University Press, 1998), 252.

³⁶ Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 8.

³⁶ Enrique Dussel, “Ethics and Community,” in *The Postmodern Bible Reader*, ed. David Jobling, Tina Pippin, and Ronald Schleifer, 301.

Therefore, I would be following the three-step methodology fostered by liberation theologians: *see, judge/discern, and act*.³⁷ I have decided to start with an analysis of the reality of *concrete life* in today's threatened planet Earth, in the light of current socio/ecological concerns.³⁸ With the help of modern scientific analyses, and using four specific issues as entry points, a depiction of the current ecological predicament is presented and discussed. The *see* involves the understanding of the realities of life in the world today. As Segundo argues, "it is the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by the continuous changes in our present-day reality, both individual and societal...."³⁹ To complete what he calls the hermeneutical circle, Segundo adds "[E]ach new reality obliges us to interpret the word of God afresh, to change reality accordingly, and then to go back and reinterpret the word of God again, and so on..."⁴⁰

As is not uncommon in biblical hermeneutics, a framework for reading texts is constructed and presented. In this particular study, that framework is shaped by the main tenets and findings of Social Ecology and ecojustice as briefly discussed above. These schools of thought can be described as disciplines which open up the present, and "as much as those which open up the past,

³⁷ For a detailed exposition of this methodology, see Carlos Mesters, *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books and London: Catholic Institute of International Relations, 1989). Carmelite Priest, Carlos Mesters, reaffirms ancient theologian's perspectives when he claims that "God has written two books, the book of life and the book of faith. The second has no purpose in itself, but exists in function of the first, in that it provides a *commentary* on its content, helps us to decipher what is unintelligible in it, and restores to those who study it the *faculty of contemplation*." (31). Emphasis original.

³⁸ This is what Mesters refers to "the situation, the pre-text," all what comes before the text. See *ibid.*, 13-15.

³⁹ *The Liberation of Theology*, 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

form an integral part of the exegetical process.”⁴¹ This second step can be described as the *judge* moment, that is, an attempt to analyze, and understand the main causes of the current predicament of the Earth. Subsequently, the framework is applied as a reading lens to study the selected New Testament texts in the search for new levels of liberating meanings.

This exegetical move is the *act* of the process. Some questions may arise, such as: Can we read the text using modern/postmodern criteria? Are we not forcing a particular interpretation into the text? Yes and no. Any interpretation of the biblical texts and of these texts in particular, is somehow tinted with post-biblical views, be they ancient or modern. As Rowland and Corner claim, “whatever the conscious intention of the original author, different levels of meaning can become apparent to later interpreters, granted that the text is free from the shackles of the author’s control and has a life of its own in the world of the reader.”⁴² As reader, one can attempt to “complete” the text, conscious that this is only one more drop of water added to the vast hermeneutical ocean. As Sri Lankan biblical critic, Sugirtharajah, argues, “At bottom, the ultimate reference of the Bible is to the present, to the reader’s current history....”⁴³ Biblical scholar, Carlos Mesters, reminds his readers that the Bible is for the

⁴¹ Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 76.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴³ R. S Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from the Margins: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 16.

people “a mirror of life,”⁴⁴ and the fundamental aim of reading the Bible is not to interpret the Bible, but to interpret life with the help of the Bible.⁴⁵

The development of the study

This dissertation comprises five chapters. Chapter one is entitled *Warning signs of a world gone awry* and sets the global context. It offers an ecological analysis of the world situation and highlights the main problems which confront humankind and otherkind. It provides a brief historical overview of the efforts and shortcomings of representatives of diverse sectors of the world community to call attention to the dangers confronting the very life of our planet Earth. In order to focus the study, four major key issues are selected and exposed: climate change; biodiversity; the availability and use of water; and the growing gap between the rich and the poor.

Chapter two describes two modern attempts to interpret and respond to the critical situation of the degradation of the environment and of the ensuing quality of life on earth. The first of these disciplines is Social Ecology, a rather secular undertaking initiated and developed by Murray Bookchin. Uruguayan social scientist, Eduardo Gudynas, develops Social Ecology from a particular Latin American perspective. The second is that of ecojustice, a faith-based, ethical/theological response to the current predicament of the planet. William Gibson defines ecojustice as “respect and fairness toward all creation, human and no human...” and says that it “means social justice in the context of ecological realities and it means ecological harmony or balance maintained in the context of social justice.”⁴⁶ The

⁴⁴ Mesters, *Defenseless Flower*, 70, 81.

⁴⁵ See Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, 39.

⁴⁶ See Bakken, Engel and Engel, *Ecology, Justice and the Christian Faith*, 5.

chapter endeavors to build a hermeneutical framework for reading New Testament texts in light of the ecological crisis, and develops a series of eight guiding Social Ecology/ ecojustice principles with which to read the Bible. These guiding principles in no way pretend to exhaust the immense richness of the texts. Moreover, the texts may show other dimensions that are not necessary brought out by the principles, thus having the ability to challenging the framework itself. In other words, the “reverse” question remains valid: do the texts provide something crucial that is missing from Social Ecology/ecojustice?

Chapter three is the first of these focused on the biblical field. After establishing relevant links between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the text focuses on the earliest canonical gospel, the Gospel of Mark. In particular, the Kingdom of God, a central theme of the gospel, is studied as well as chapter 13, the so-called Markan apocalypse. What are the main features of the reign that Jesus announced? What are its socioecological/justice dimensions and how are they illuminated by the “hermeneutical principles” In turn, does the announcement and the content of this key metaphor enlarge the field of the principles themselves? How is nature portrayed in the Gospel and whar are its implications from the ecojustice/social ecology perspectives?

Chapter four deals with a different New Testament genre, i.e. the letter. The study centers its attention on selected verses from chapter eight of Paul’s letter to the Romans, practically the only Pauline text that makes extensive references to the question of creation and the role of human beings in it. Creation is depicted as groaning in labor pains... “waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (Romans 8:19). In what ways does this particular text provide motivation and challenges for the commitment of

the people to work for ecological justice? How does it portray a holistic and cosmic understanding of liberation/redemption? How does it relate to the “program” that social ecology provides?

The last chapter of this dissertation focuses on the last book of the Christian Bible, the book of Revelation. Revelation is a controversial text, as it is shown in the study. Nevertheless, it ends with a powerful message of hope, expressed in the seer’s vision of a new heaven and a new earth. How does this fundamental principle, “hope,” relate to the building of a more just and ecologically sustainable society as posited by ecojustice/social ecology? What are the reach and limitations, if any, of these proposals? It is worth noting at this stage that while in Mark’s parables of the Kingdom and in the letter to the Romans the metaphor of nature is prevalent, in Revelation the city is the dominant metaphor.

A personal pilgrimage

Last but not least, one may ask, why am I involved with these questions? And the answer lies in my own personal story. I was born into a poor working class family of three children and grew up in a popular immigrant neighborhood in the city of Buenos Aires. I started to work when I was eleven years old to help my family make ends meet. I learned how to hunger and thirst for justice, early in my childhood. I finished my secondary studies going to school at night, while working during the day. I finished my university studies thanks to a gracious scholarship offered by the church. I was the privileged sibling among three children to complete graduate studies. Early in my ministry and

ecumenical responsibilities, I tried hard to combine the pastoral ministry with political militancy, an alliance which in no way was easy in my country. I wanted to be coherent, in keeping together words and actions. This led me to direct political participation, with the ensuing cost that this entailed at the time of a military dictatorship in Argentina. I was the first Methodist minister in my country to be a candidate for national congressman. I was later elected as the General Secretary of the Ecumenical Youth Movement in Latin America (ULAJE), and worked closely with young people of the continent for several years. They were part and parcel of the vast and impoverished majority of the people, sharing common histories of economic exploitation, social marginalization, and exclusion. Reading the Bible with them has helped me to find a renewed awareness of its message of liberation and justice for humankind and for God's whole creation.

I was later invited to join the staff of the World Council of Churches, where *inter alia*, I was responsible for the program on *Education for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation*. My ecumenical pilgrimage has provided me with what I view as a unique opportunity and privilege to be exposed to Christians around the world who were seeking to be faithful to God's call. These are committed women and men who, inspired by the liberating gospel of Jesus, have not hesitated to risk their own lives, working together with their own people, in the manifold struggles for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. They have been a source of constant challenge and inspiration for me. My specific interest in working in the areas of the intersections between Biblical studies and contemporary problems comes as a result of seeing the way the Scriptures have been and are still being (ab)used in many places to

keep people domesticated and under control. I strongly believe that an engaged reading and rereading of the biblical texts through new lenses and with broader perspectives, constitutes today a remarkable challenge to ground liberating options for the people. I am convinced that there is not such a thing as a “neutral” reading of the Bible, and that each person’s social location definitively “colors” her/his understanding of the texts. This is my personal limitation, and also my personal commitment. At this stage in my life, I put in writing these reflections as a humble token of appreciation for all that I have received from so many sisters and brothers from around the world, our beloved and sacred planet Earth.

CHAPTER I

WARNING SIGNS OF A WORLD GONE AWRY

Setting the Context.

Our world is shrinking. The now famous pictures of planet Earth taken by astronauts and satellites in outer space have produced awe and admiration. There is Mother Earth, circling the incommensurable cosmos, a small dot in the midst of a galaxy among millions of other galaxies. And there are we, the humans, newcomers into this remarkable story, a story of a planet in a system that is also a relative latecomer to the Universe.⁴⁷ This is our home, our dwelling place,⁴⁸ and moreover, as far as we know, this is the *only* place that is properly prepared to sustain and maintain our human nature. Discussing the spin-off of space exploration, Lovelock states that:

The real bonus has been that for the first time in human history we have had the chance to look at the Earth from space, and the information gained from seeing from the outside our azurgreen planet in all its global beauty has given rise to a whole new set of questions and answers.⁴⁹

Gaia, the classic Greek name of the Earth goddess, also was known as *Ge*. *Ge* is the Greek root of words such as *geography* and *geology*. Modern scientists,

⁴⁷ Some popular ways have been used to help us understand the rather sophisticated theories of cosmogenesis, that is, the story of the origin of the cosmos. See Carl Sagan, *The Dragons of Eden: Speculations on the Evolution of Human Intelligence* (New York: Random House, 1977), 14-16; John Cobb, *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology, and Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992), 119-120, and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 27-28. All of them report on Robert Overman's device.

⁴⁸ The Greek word is *oikos*, which is the same root for words like ecology/ical, ecumenics/al, and economics.

⁴⁹ James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 7. See also his *The Ages of Gaia* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1988).

including Lovelock himself, have developed the so-called “*Gaia* hypothesis” as a way to understand our planet.⁵⁰ *Gaia* is a totality, a single living system that acts as a unified organism, and all of us, humans, animals, vegetables, minerals, etc. are part of it. Ecofeminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether puts it this way: “Our kinship with all earth creatures is global, linking us to the whole living *Gaia* today. It also spans the ages, linking our material substance with all the beings that have gone before us on earth and even to the dust of exploding stars”⁵¹ The picture is useful to convey a new ecological awareness that describes reality--human and more than human⁵²-- as an encompassing whole where everything is related to everything else.

Images of a spaceship or of a boat have now become common to illustrate the world in which we live. But there are indeed serious problems in the spaceship Earth. Although we are all on the same boat, it has become evident that not all travel in the same class. There is a minority, fewer than 20% of the total “passengers,” who still can afford to travel first class, consuming carelessly approximately more than 80% of the full complement of available resources of the ship. At the same time, the great majority, more than 80% of the wayfarers, travel overcrowded in the cargo haul, many of them barely surviving. To make matters worse, we have discovered that the name of the ship is...Titanic. That

⁵⁰ James Lovelock sees the Earth as a living superorganism. He writes: “We have since defined *Gaia* as a complex entity involving the Earth’s biosphere, atmosphere, oceans and soil; totally constituting a feedback or a cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet.” *Gaia*, 11.

⁵¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 252.

⁵² Concerning the choice of this particular terminology, see the critique on “apartheid thinking” in Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 32-33.

is, the boat, Mother Earth, is in serious risk of a colossal catastrophe. People have called it the ecological catastrophe.

The US ecumenical scholar Richard A. Falk refers to the growth of a planetary consciousness among people, and uses the image of “planetary citizens.” He argues that “more and more, such people question inequities in the distribution of wealth and income within and among countries...”⁵³

Ethicist Larry Rasmussen, following Overman’s device, states that “the astonishing thing is the last syllable of the last word of the last volume. Here humans turned the great tide against life itself.”⁵⁴ With these words, a serious warning is served. Rasmussen is not speaking about minor problems than can be fixed with some changes here and there. He is arguing that life itself on the planet is currently threatened. What is really going on with Mother Earth and with her children, humans and non-humans alike? The predicament Rasmussen describes has both local and global characteristics. Local and global realities become intertwined, interconnected, cross fertilized, and mutually interdependent. Underlying these intimate connections, John Cobb stated: “The wedding of science and technology in the past century has given us the power to transform the environment radically, not merely locally, but globally.”⁵⁵

Such connections between the global and the local have triggered people to coin a new word, *glocal*. In one possible definition “it refers to the

⁵³ In the Prologue to *The Global Predicament: Ecological Perspectives on World Order*, ed. David W. Orr and Marvin S. Soroos (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), x.

⁵⁴ Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 26.

⁵⁵ Cobb, *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology, and Justice*, 121.

individual/group/ division/ unit/organization/community, who is willing and able to think globally and act locally.”⁵⁶ Eventually, different combinations were tried, such as “think locally and act globally,”⁵⁷ and even “think and act locally and globally.” This last is the one the participants at the meetings of the World Social Forum (WSF) strongly argue for and support.⁵⁸

Are these voices to be taken seriously? Or is this simply an analysis coming just from some religious and apocalyptic extremists?⁵⁹ Well, it seems that these are not just lonely voices crying “wolf” to terrorize or instill fear in the people. Voices of this kind have been around for some time among us and they deserve serious attention.

Historical Background

⁵⁶ www.geocities.com/rija_rasoava/startpage.htm/ November 2, 2004.

⁵⁷ Mike Lewis, in a critique to the rampant and unregulated globalization of the market, writes that “Going glocal rejects the premise that a deregulated global marketplace is the harbinger of global prosperity. Rather, the power and role of markets and economic need to be re-rooted in the social context within which human beings live out their lives.” See “Going Glocal: Putting the Local onto the Global Stage,” *Making Waves*, Vol. 15, number 1 (2002): 37-40.

⁵⁸ The World Social Forum (WSF) “is an open meeting place where groups and movements of civil society--opposed to neo-liberalism and to a world dominated by capital or by any form of imperialism, but engaged in building of a planetary society centered on the human person--come together to pursue their thinking, to debate ideas democratically, to formulate proposals, share their experiences freely, and network for effective action. Its *motto*, ‘another world is possible,’ has inspired millions of people in their struggle for justice and peace. The WSF relates organizations and movements engaged in concrete action at levels from the local to the international to build another world.” From the WSF Website: www.forumsocialmundial.org.br. ‘What is the WSF’ and ‘Charter of Principles.’ November 2, 2004.

⁵⁹ See Robert Royal, *The Virgin and the Dynamo: Use and Abuse of Religion in Environmental Debates* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999). This book confirms all the stereotypes of the western mentality’s absurdities *vis à vis* the environment. Written not without certain destructive creativity, this is a typical book that Exxon, Shell, and other world polluters would love to have in a prominent place on their bookshelves.

Already more than three decades ago, international institutions and organizations called attention to the impending ecological crisis. They highlighted some of the fundamental and interrelated problems that continue to confront equally humankind and the more than human in the world. Social scientists, political leaders, activists, philosophers, and other scholars have endeavored to produce comprehensive interpretations of these often labeled apocalyptic signs of the times. They have not only warned the world community--the global village--⁶⁰ of the impending perils that surround us all, but also have suggested ways to correct these dangerous situations. Three significant Reports, as well as four United Nations (UN) International Conferences merit attention here. This is in order to better understand the full

⁶⁰ This expression is attributed to Marshal McLuhan (1911-1980), a Canadian media analyst, who coined the phrase in one of his books, written collaboratively with Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (New York; Toronto: Simon and Schuster, 1989). The title of the book reflects a mistake of the typesetter, mistake which McLuhan decided not to change. In the book, McLuhan states that "The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village," *ibid.*,31; and that "'Time' has ceased, 'space' has vanished. We now live in a global village... as a simultaneous happening," *ibid.*,63. McLuhan, in his earlier book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), also advanced a similar idea, asserting that "The 'electronic age' has sealed the entire human family into a single global tribe," *ibid.*,8. Much water has flowed under the bridge since McLuhan first presented his statements. Critics and disciples alike have engaged McLuhan for more than half a century. One of them is Benjamin Symes, who does not embrace a purely naïve understanding of the global village. He is acutely aware of the asymmetry of the power relations in the world today, and of its structural injustices. He critically comments that "McLuhan seems to assume that the entire population of the globe is plugged into communications technology to the same extent." See "Marshal McLuham's Global Village," in <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/students/bas9401.html>. December 15, 2004. In other words, inside the global village there is still a center--where power converges and is exercised-- and a periphery, and therefore, severe tension remains.

picture, for example, the voices that called attention to the urgency of the global crisis, and to capture the interrelatedness of the issues discussed.

The Club of Rome Report

The Club of Rome is an international think tank, whose essential mission is to act as an independent, global, non official catalyst for change. It describes itself as a group that seeks to identify the most crucial problems facing humanity, and endeavors to find future alternative solutions. The Club is governed by three complementary principles: a global perspective in examining issues, holistic thinking and the seeking of a deeper understanding of complexity within the contemporary problems, and an interdisciplinary and long term perspective focusing on the choices and policies determining the destiny of future generations.⁶¹ On March 1, 1972, the first edition of *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* was published.⁶²

The Report sounded a powerful warning clarion against the economic trends that easily equate development with (unlimited) exponential growth. Going beyond the purely economic realm, the Report emphatically affirms the urgency to interrelate it with other global issues, “including in particular those of man’s [*sic*] relationship with his [*sic*] environment.”⁶³ It is concerned with the ecological problems that confront humankind and with the limited carrying capacity of planet Earth. The Executive Committee of the Club of Rome, in its commentary on the Report states: “Our goal was to provide warnings of potential world crisis if these trends are allowed

⁶¹ Club of Rome Website: www.clubofrome.org.

⁶² Donella H. Meadows, et al., eds. (New York: Universe Books, 1972).

⁶³ Ibid., 192.

to continue.”⁶⁴ The Report speaks of a “sense of extreme urgency,”⁶⁵ and clearly affirms the need for a “global strategy” to be able to deal with the issues at stake.⁶⁶ The problems are of such magnitude that they cannot be adequately dealt with by separate nation states or even by a region.

Critics of the Report--while saluting its good intentions--have remarked on its lack of radicalism. For example, R. L. Sarkar, from India, refers to it as bringing back almost two centuries later a disguised (and discredited, I might add) Malthusian analysis.⁶⁷ Ethicist James Nash, claims that the Report “was wrong in its estimations and calculations... Yet, it also appears to be right in principle and on its main point: non renewable [resources] *will* eventually run out or become too cost-ineffective to extract.”⁶⁸ An update of the Report *The Limits to Growth: the 30-year Update*, was published in 2004. Its approach remains basically the same.⁶⁹

The Brandt Report

In 1977, the then president of the World Bank, Robert McNamara, took another significant step to increase global awareness to tackle key issues of life and death for humankind and otherkind. To do this, McNamara called upon former chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and 1971 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Willy Brandt, to be the chairperson of what later became known as the “Independent

⁶⁴ Ibid., 186.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 196.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 191.

⁶⁷ R.L. Sarkar *The Bible, Ecology and Environment* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 242.

⁶⁸ James Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 42.

⁶⁹ Donella Meadows, et al., ed. (White River Junction, Vt: Chelsea Green Pub., 2004).

Commission for International Development Issues”, popularly known as the “North-South Commission.” On February 12, 1980, a Report was presented to the General Secretary of the United Nations (UN), entitled *North-South: A Program for Survival. The Report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues under the Chairmanship of Willy Brandt*.⁷⁰

The principal objective of the Report was “to study the grave global issues arising from the economic and social disparities of the world community and to suggest ways of promoting adequate solutions to the problems involved in development and in attacking absolute poverty.”⁷¹ Moreover, the Report stated that the Commission would strive above all to convince decision-makers and public opinion “that profound changes are required in international relations, particularly international economic relations.”⁷²

The main emphases of the North-South Report are on economic matters. It includes a number of proposals for the reform and transformation of the world economic (dis)order. It also deals with other related critical questions that concern the very survival of humanity, such as hunger and food, unemployment and health care, armament/ disarmament, population, and the questions concerning the environmental damage. In the summary of recommendations the Report states: “All nations have to cooperate more urgently in international management of the atmosphere and other global

⁷⁰ Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1981.

⁷¹ Ibid., 8.

⁷² Ibid., 11.

commons, and in the prevention of irreversible ecological damage.”⁷³ Brandt writes in the Introduction of the study:

Our Report is based on what appears to be the simplest common interest: that mankind [*sic*] wants to survive, and one might even add has the moral obligation to survive. This not only raises the traditional questions of peace and war, but also of how to overcome world hunger, mass misery, and alarming disparities between the living conditions of rich and poor. If reduced to a simple denominator, this report deals with peace.”⁷⁴

The Report received considerable international attention and for many years there was sustained interest in it. Nevertheless, it was not exempt from strong criticism. A few months after its release, Gavin Williams, an African political economist, took the Report to task. Williams acknowledges that while the Report has some important political elements--particularly those related to the advocacy of a social democratic ideology supporting multinational institutions--its basic approach is weak and lacks deeper analysis. Williams writes:

[The Report] fails to acknowledge, much less come to terms with contradictions within the strategies which it advocates. Its suggestions for the restructuring of international financial institutions and national trading policies, (necessary because if left to themselves economic forces tend to produce a growing inequality), fail to take any account of the nature of contemporary capitalism and the problems and contradictions involved in its reconstruction. By ignoring these problems and by giving them a timeless quality..., this report contains little of real substance, constituting a collection of “well intentioned” formulas with substantive moral posturing.⁷⁵

Despite its limitations, the Report underlines the importance of the relations of the issues it discusses, to see the picture in a holistic way. One could well argue that in this sense, it could be seen as a harbinger of the significant

⁷³ Ibid., 284.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁵ Gavin Williams, “The Brandt Report: An Introduction,” *Review of African Political Economy* Vol.7, No 19 (1980): 77-86.

ecumenical program launched by the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Vancouver, Canada, 1983, under the title: Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation.⁷⁶

The Bruntland Report

The third international document relevant for this study is the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by the then Prime Minister of Norway, Dr. Gro Harlem Bruntland.⁷⁷ Barely four years after the completion of the Brandt Report, in December 1983, the then UN Secretary General, Peruvian Javier Pérez de Cuellar, called upon Bruntland to “establish and chair a special, independent commission,”⁷⁸ with the aim to address major challenges identified by the UN General Assembly.⁷⁹ The Report sets “a global agenda for change”⁸⁰ for the international community. Hailed as the most important document of the decade on the future of the world, this Report was prepared in response to the need to re-examine the critical environmental and development problems of the planet in order to formulate realistic proposals to solve them, and to ensure that human progress be sustained through development without bankrupting the resources of future generations. Due to its mandate, the Report is focused on the environment but, at the

⁷⁶ For a review of the program, see Preman Niles, Compiler, *Between the Flood and the Rainbow: Interpreting the Conciliar Process of Mutual Commitment (Covenant) to Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1992), and Carlos Sintado, “The Process of Mutual Commitment (Covenant) to Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation” (S.T.M. Thesis, Drew University, 2001).

⁷⁷ The full title of the Report is *Our Common Future: World Commission on Environment and Development* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁷⁸ Ibid., ix.

⁷⁹ It is interesting to note here that Dr. Gro Bruntland was hitherto the only politician to move from the position of Minister of the Environment to Prime Minister of a nation.

⁸⁰ These are the first five words of the Chairman’s [sic] Foreword. Ibid. ix.

same time, the Commission was acutely aware of the close interconnectedness of different issues, particularly the relationship between economic and environmental concerns. To have limited the scope of the Report only to environmental issues--according to the words of the Chairperson--“would have been a grave mistake...[because] many critical survival issues are related to uneven development, poverty, and population growth”.⁸¹ From the outset, and after an analysis of the main changes in population patterns, economic activity and technology, the report sets a clear framework for its work: “These related changes have locked the global economy and global ecology together in new ways... We are forced to accustom ourselves to an accelerating ecological interdependence among nations. Ecology and economy are becoming ever more interwoven--locally, regionally, nationally, and globally--into a seamless net of causes and effects.”⁸² Moreover, the Report highlights the existence of injustices in the world, and speaks of “the widening of the gap between ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries.” It mentions the direct impact of the many social and economic disparities on the environmental conditions and strongly argues that “inequality is the planet’s main ‘environmental’ problem.”⁸³

Fundamental changes are envisaged as the only way to deal with the impending crisis: “This Commission believes that people can build a future that is more prosperous, more just and more secure.”⁸⁴ However, this statement is immediately qualified. It requests the political will of the nations to adequately deal with the crisis. And, in light of the pressing questions, it states:

⁸¹ Ibid., xi-xii.

⁸² Ibid., 5.

⁸³ Ibid., 6. These insights are important as they are very close to the findings of social ecology (see chapter two of this study).

⁸⁴ Ibid., 1.

But the Commission's hope for the future is conditional on decisive political action now to begin managing environmental resources to ensure both sustainable human progress and human survival. We are not forecasting a future; we are serving a notice--an urgent notice based on the latest and best scientific evidence---that the time has come to take the decisions needed to secure the resources to sustain this and coming generations. We do not offer a detailed blueprint for actions, but instead a pathway by which the peoples of the world may enlarge their spheres of cooperation.⁸⁵

The Report will be remembered--among other things--for its definition of the concept of "sustainable development." Accordingly, it is a kind of process that "meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs."⁸⁶ The Report claims that "the concept of development does imply limits--not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities."⁸⁷ Since then, the term "sustainable development" has gained acceptance, and significant time has been devoted to discuss the accuracy and relevance of such a definition.

Without pretension to claim undue credit, one has to be aware that the ecumenical movement has pioneered the concept of sustainability. Already in 1974, and partially in response to the Club of Rome Report, a group of economists, scientists and theologians gathered together in Bucharest, in a consultation on "Science and Technology for Human Development: The Ambiguous Future-The Christian Hope." The Report of the Consultation is a milestone in the ecumenical reflections. Despite its length, and because it was

⁸⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 8.

the first definition of the issue produced at an ecumenical gathering, the text is worth quoting here. It weaves related questions with remarkable clarity. The relevant parts read as follows:

For a short period in recent history some societies cultivated the dream of unlimited wealth, of overcoming poverty not primarily by sharing wealth but by increasing it so that there would be enough for all. Now we face a sobering return to reality. We begin to perceive that the future will require a husbanding of resources and a reduction of expectations of global economic growth. We do not expect that humanity can live as the most extravagant have been living, and we no longer believe that the spillover of wealth from the top will mean prosperity for all. There may be a divine irony in the fact that the very technological victories which once supported the vision of affluence, —by their contribution to increasing consumption of resources, growing population, and pollution—are bringing an end to the dream of a carefree and affluent future. The goal must be a robust, sustainable society, where every individual can feel secure that his or her quality of life will be maintained or improved. We can already delineate some necessary characteristics of this enduring society. *First*, social stability cannot be obtained without an equitable distribution of what is in scarce supply and common opportunity to participate in social decisions. *Second*, a robust global society will not be sustainable unless the need for food is at any time well below the global capacity to supply it, and unless the emissions of pollutants are well below the capacity of the ecosystems to absorb them. *Third*, the new social organization will be sustainable only as long as the rate of use of non-renewable resources does not outrun the increase in resources made available through technological innovation. *Finally*, a sustainable society requires a level of human activity which is not adversely influenced by the never ending, large and frequent natural variations in global climate.⁸⁸

It is fitting here to mention that the ecumenical movement also worked to offer an alternative to the idea of “sustainable development.” It has given preference to the concept of “sustainable societies/communities.” Canadian David Hallman, makes a critical analysis of the concept of sustainable development.

He argues that:

⁸⁸ *Study Encounter*, vol.10, no.69 (1974): 2. For a review of the Bucharest meeting, see Joseph E. Bush Jr., “Social Justice and the Natural Environment in the Study program of the World Council of Churches” (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1993), 386-435.

“Sustainable Development” assumes the model of development dominant since the end of the WW II, as led by the industrialized nations in a globalizing economy and imposed on non-industrialized countries. It now tries to make this planetwide economic regime environmentally sustainable. “Sustainable society” or “sustainable community,” by contrast, begins with local and regional populations and conditions and asks what kind of economy and environment sustains communities over time on terms indigenous to localities and regions.⁸⁹

In an article reviewing the work of the Bruntland Commission, and the implications of the Report for the ecumenical community, British scholar David Gosling, challenges the readers to go beyond what the Report says. He claims that

For Christians, this balancing of today’s demands and the need for tomorrow’s children is crucial. For Christians are not only committed to the long-term survival of our planet... but must also exhibit a bias in favor of the most neglected and vulnerable parts of the human community. The Churches might therefore wish to go even further that the Bruntland commissioners in advocating the rights of future generations!⁹⁰

Some twelve years later, Bruntland herself assessed the Commission’s work in this way: “I believe it did move the world more than an inch forward.”⁹¹

The United Nations (UN) World Conferences

Four UN World Conferences held in the space of less than four decades in Stockholm (1972), Rio de Janeiro (1992), Johannesburg (2002), and Copenhagen (2009) merit mention in this brief analysis.

⁸⁹ “Ecumenical Responses to Climate Change: A Summary of the History and Dynamics of Ecumenical Involvement in the Issue of Climate Change,” *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol.49, number 2 (1997): 131-141.

⁹⁰ David Gosling, “Redeeming Creation,” in *The Ecumenical Movement Tomorrow: Suggestions for Approaches and Alternatives*, ed. Marc Reuver, Friedrich Solms, and Gerry Huizer (Kampen and Geneva: Kok Publishing House/WCC Publications, 1992), 134.

⁹¹ Gro Harlem Bruntland, “*Our Common Future* and the Ten Years after Rio: How Far Have We Come and Where Should We be Going?” in *Earth Summit 2002: A New Deal*, ed. Felix Dodds (London and Sterling, VA.: Earthscan, 2000), 254.

Stockholm, 1972

The first conference took place between the work of the Club of Rome (1972) and the Brandt Report (1980). It is referred to as the UN Conference on the Human Environment. It took place in Stockholm, Sweden, 5-16 June, 1972 and was the first world meeting devoted to questions pertaining to the environment. Likewise, it was the first UN Conference to establish a specific forum for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), or to put it positively, for organizations that represents the interests of the civil society.

The Conference helped to focus the international interest on fundamental environmental problems, calling attention particularly to the issue of the transnational character of the phenomena. Air, land and water pollution, for example, were identified as global issues, overcoming national boundaries and affecting peoples and the environment alike, without recognition of geographical or political boundaries. The meeting issued a statement, entitled the Declaration of the UN Conference on the Human Environment.⁹² Despite its title, the Declaration has been criticized for its excessive use of non-inclusive language. It is preceded by a proclamation which begins with the following affirmation: “*Man* is both creature and molder of *his* environment, which gives *him* physical sustenance and affords *him* the opportunity for intellectual, moral, social and spiritual growth.”⁹³ What happened to the other half of the human community?

⁹² Full text of the Declaration as well as other relevant documents adopted at the conference proceedings can be found in the *Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. Stockholm, 5-16 June 1972* (New York: United Nations Publication, 1973).

⁹³ Ibid., 3; Point 1 (italics mine).

The proclamation emphasizes that “the protection and improvement of the human [finally!] environment is a major issue which affects the well-being of peoples and economic development throughout the world.”⁹⁴ It calls all the citizens of the planet to assume responsibility for the defense and improvement of the human environment, and argues that “international cooperation is also needed.”⁹⁵

The Declaration goes beyond purely “environmentalist” interests, and tries to link other issues that are interconnected with each other in the complex web of reality: “economic and social development is essential for ensuring a favorable living and working environment for man [*sic*] and for creating conditions on earth that are necessary for the improvement of the quality of life.”⁹⁶ It affirms the need for justice, particularly for “developing” countries in international commerce (Principle 10), and requests that both financial and technical resources be made available to preserve and improve the environment (Principle 12). The text calls for the elimination and complete destruction of nuclear weapons and other means of mass destruction (Principle 26). The Conference passed a resolution condemning nuclear weapon tests, calling upon nuclear States “to abandon their plans to carry out such tests since they may lead to further contamination of the environment.”⁹⁷

The Conference also will be remembered for its agreement to move that the General Assembly of the UN designate 5 June, as World Environment Day.⁹⁸ It also was the catalyst for the establishment of the UN Environmental Program (UNEP), to act as a motivational tool for actions to protect the environment worldwide.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 3; Point 2.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 4; Point 7.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 4; Principle 8.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 32; Resolution 3 (I).

⁹⁸ Ibid., 32; Resolution 2 (I).

Additionally, it approved a significant and detailed *Action Plan for the Human Environment*. More than thirty years later, the plan still has validity and the worsening ecological and economic situations of the world beg the question: Why has the Action Plan not been duly implemented?

Rio de Janeiro, 1992.

Almost five years after the publication of the Bruntland Report, and twenty years after Stockholm, the world community, through its representatives, was invited to the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). The political context of the world had changed dramatically since the first international conference in Stockholm. However, the changes had been not only at the political level. The quality of life of peoples and of the environment had worsened globally. Shortly before the conference, Larry Stammer, from the United States, reminded his readers that

Since 1972, the world has lost nearly 494 million acres of trees--an area the size of the United States east of the Mississippi, Worldwatch said. Chemicals have ripped a hole in the ozone layer. Deserts have expanded by 297 million acres, claiming more land than that is planted to crops in China and Nigeria combined. An estimate 480 million tons of topsoil, roughly equal to that which covers the agricultural land of India and France, has been lost. Thousands of plant and animal species no longer exist.⁹⁹

The gathering took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3-14 June 1992. Thousands of people's organizations, NGOs, and ecumenical bodies, contributed from their own perspectives and experiences to the final outcome of the event. Results of the Conference included: Agenda 21, the Rio Declaration, and two important

⁹⁹ *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, California), 26 May 1992.

conventions, one on biological diversity (CBD) and the other on climate change (UNFCCC).

The Principles of the Rio Declaration, while reaffirming earlier commitments of the international community, did sharpen the focus on certain issues. They highlighted--*inter alia*--“the essential task of eradicating poverty as an indispensable requirement for sustainable development” (Principle 5); called for special priority to the countries “most environmentally vulnerable” (Principle 6); affirmed the need to “cooperate in a spirit of global partnership to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth’s ecosystem, ” (Principle 7) and pointed out the “vital role” that women and indigenous people play “in environmental management and development.” (Principles 20 and 22).¹⁰⁰

Agenda 21--in the words of Maurice Strong, the Secretary-General of the Conference--“constitutes the most comprehensive and far-reaching program of action ever approved by the world community.”¹⁰¹ It sets priority actions, describes environmental effects, and produces a list of essential means to deal with the issues.¹⁰² However, Agenda 21 had its shortcomings. It disappointed the expectations of many people from around the world. In this sense, Rasmussen observes that

¹⁰⁰ Full text of the Declaration can be found in United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992), *Agenda 21: Program of Action for Sustainable Development; Rio Declaration on Environment and Development; Statement of Forest Principles: the Final Text of Agreements negotiated by Governments at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), 3-14 June 1992, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil* (New York: United Nations Dept. of Public Information, 1993), 9-11.

¹⁰¹ In the Prologue to Granberg-Michaelson, *Redeeming the Creation: The Rio Summit*, viii.

¹⁰² A detailed description can be found in *The Global Partnership for Environment and Development: A Guide to Agenda 21, Post Rio Edition* (New York: United Nations, 1993).

There is a serious tension between the means proposed to achieve sustainable development...and the goals necessary to achieve such development...It is, in fact, likely that the means utterly frustrate the end. If that is so the survival ethics fails. Development as a concept remains anchored in the very strategies by which current economic growth was achieved, the kind of growth which is now the bane of ecological well-being. It is rooted in post-World War II economic expansion and continues within the framework of globalized capitalist economy.¹⁰³

The Conference also approved two important legally-binding agreements. The first was the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), whose ultimate goal was the stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere and led eventually to the establishment of the Kyoto Protocol.¹⁰⁴ The second was the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which aimed at the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and a fair sharing of the use of genetic resources. These two key issues are discussed in greater detail below.

¹⁰³ “An Earth Ethics for Survival,” in *Ethics and Agenda 21: Moral Implications of a Global Consensus*, ed. Noel J. Brown and Pierre Quiblier (New York: United Nations, 1994), 55f.

¹⁰⁴ In a nutshell, the Protocol aims to ensure the limitations of the anthropogenic (human produced) carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. Its goal is to reduce the overall emissions of such gases by at least 5 per cent below 1990 levels in the commitment period 2008 to 2012. The text of the Protocol to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was adopted at the third session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) in Kyoto, Japan, on 11 December 1997. The Protocol is subject to ratification, acceptance, approval, or accession by Parties to the Convention. It shall enter into force on the ninetieth day after the date on which not fewer than 55 Parties to the Convention, incorporating Annex I Parties which accounted in total for at least 55 % of the total carbon dioxide emissions for 1990 from that group, have deposited their instruments of ratification, acceptance, approval, or accession. The Protocol entered into force on February 16, 2005. The United States of America, responsible for one-fourth of the total emission of gasses that contribute to the greenhouse effect, and Australia--both parties to the Convention--have expressed their unwillingness to ratify the Protocol. Source: <http://unfccc.int/resource/convkp.html>. November 10, 2004. Full text of the Protocol can be found on this website. Later on, and after a change of government, Australia finally ratified the Protocol.

At Rio 1992, a parallel “Global Forum” took place. Among its participants, there were representatives of different churches and of the ecumenical movement. The ecumenical community had chosen for the overall theme of its gathering a rather suggestive and revelatory title: “Searching for the New Heavens and the New Earth: an Ecumenical Response to UNCED.”¹⁰⁵

One of the documents produced by the ecumenical delegation was the Letter to the Churches. In it, the delegates expressed their concern for and commitment to God’s good creation, and noted that they “write with a sense of urgency. The earth is in peril. Our home is in plain jeopardy... For the very first time in the history of creation, certain life support systems of the planet are being destroyed by human actions.”¹⁰⁶ They concluded that “the prevailing system is exploiting nature and peoples on a worldwide scale and promises to continue in an intensified rate.”¹⁰⁷ They confessed anew that “The Spirit is the Giver and sustainer of life.”¹⁰⁸ The letter ends with hopeful and challenging words, “Our churches themselves must be places where we learn anew what it means that God’s covenant extends to all creatures, by rediscovering the eco-centric dimension of the Bible.”¹⁰⁹

Johannesburg, 2002.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) took place just outside of the city of Johannesburg, South Africa, from August 26 to September 4, 2002. The WSSD was fundamentally given the task to hold a

¹⁰⁵ For an account of both the UNCED meeting and the ecumenical gathering, see Granberg-Michaelson, *Redeeming the Creation: The Rio Summit*.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 70.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 71.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 72.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 73.

ten-year review of the UNCED with the purpose of reinvigorating the commitment of the global community to sustainable development. The gathering again brought together thousands of participants, from representatives of grass-root organizations to heads of states and governments.¹¹⁰ As in Rio, parallel events were organized by NGOs and other independent groups. These groups showed the many diverse faces of the civil society, usually defending different positions than those adopted by their official governmental delegations. Among these groups there was also a significant ecumenical delegation.

The organizers of the official summit recognized that “the progress in implementing sustainable development has been extremely disappointing since the 1992 Earth Summit, with poverty deepening and environmental degradation worsening. What the world wanted...was not a new philosophical or political debate but rather, a summit of actions and results.”¹¹¹

The ecumenical delegation developed in less diplomatic language a more realistic assessment of what happened during the period between the two world gatherings. As part of the background papers and preparatory materials, the Justice, Peace and Creation Team of the World Council of Churches commented:

In the ten years since Rio, the concept of “sustainable development,” combining the need for development with the concept of sustainability, has been undermined by the inexorable march of corporate-driven, market-oriented economic forces and their global outreach. The

¹¹⁰ Background information and additional documentation can be found in the official website of the event: www.johannesburgsummit.org/html.

¹¹¹ The Johannesburg Summit test: What will change? In www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/whats-new/feature-story41.html. January 22, 2003.

underlying development paradigm, with its strong emphasis on economic growth and marked expansion, has served first and foremost the interests of powerful economic players. It has further marginalized the poor sectors of society, simultaneously undermining their basic security in terms of access to land, water, food, employment, other basic services, and a healthy environment.¹¹²

The ecumenical delegation made clear its position even before the beginning of the Summit. It was rooted in a biblical and theological understanding that sustains ethical discourse and corresponding actions in solidarity with the poor. It stated that

By asserting the primacy of justice, ecological sustainability, and the creation of viable communities, the ecumenical community states that authentic human development can never be achieved when the ultimate goal is amassing wealth and material goods, especially when these are at the expense of others in the global community and of the health of the global environmental commons. Justice and equity must be at the heart of any sustainable economic, social or environmental system supporting the whole Earth Community.¹¹³

Furthermore, the delegation wanted “...alternatives to the WSSD negotiations ... particularly alternatives that emerge among communities struggling for life in the globalising economy.”¹¹⁴

What did the Johannesburg Conference produce? Three main documents were formulated as the result of negotiations during the event and were adopted by the Summit. The first is the Political Declaration, entitled The Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development. The second and much longer document was entitled Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on

¹¹² <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wccc/what/jpc/wssd.html/>. 23 August 2002.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., November 9, 2004.

Sustainable Development.¹¹⁵ The third is a list of partnerships among organizations of the civil society, private sectors, governments and international organizations.

The Political Declaration reaffirmed the importance of the interrelated character of the issues and the signatories “assume a collective responsibility to advance and strengthen the interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development--economic development, social development and environmental protection--at the local, national, regional and global levels”(5).¹¹⁶ It recognized that “the deep fault line that divides human society between the rich and the poor and the ever-increasing gap between the developed and developing worlds pose a major threat to global prosperity, security and stability”(12). The document also issued a serious political warning: “unless we act in a manner that fundamentally changes their lives, the poor of the world may lose confidence in their representatives and the democratic systems to which we remain committed, seeing their representatives as nothing more than sounding brass or tinkling cymbals”(15). The text reaffirmed the commitment to sustainable development and ended with a solemn statement: “From the African continent, the cradle of humankind, we solemnly pledge to the peoples of the world and the generations that will surely inherit this Earth that we are determined to ensure that our collective hope for sustainable development is realized” (37).

¹¹⁵ Full text of the documents can be found in <http://ods-dds-ny.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/no2> Preparatory papers can be found in www.un.org/summit.html /documents/ summit-docs.html

¹¹⁶ Numbers in parenthesis refer to paragraphs of the Declaration.

An unsigned feature article, entitled “The Johannesburg Summit Test: What Will Change?” acknowledges that “not everyone was pleased with the outcome.” However it argues that the meeting not only “has laid the groundwork and paved the way for action” but also “marked a major departure from previous UN conferences in many ways, in structure and outcome, that could have a major effect on the way the international community approaches problem solving in the future.”¹¹⁷ In a different vein, Canadian scholar David G. Hallman, while recognizing that “there were modest accomplishments that we can celebrate,” takes a critical stance *vis à vis* the Summit’s results. Hallmann writes:

WSSD was a missed opportunity... [It] could have been a turning point. The Global community could have responded seriously to the injustice of the disparity between the access to resources by the wealthy and what is available to the poor as well as taking concerted action to address the on-going assaults on the ecological well-being of the Earth. Instead, agreements were negotiated which are likely to have limited impact on improving the lives of the marginalized and the health of the planet.¹¹⁸

Copenhagen, 2009.

The international community gathered in the capital city of Denmark, Copenhagen, December 7 to 18 2009, to review the world situation since Johannesburg and to adopt new measures and agreements to deal with the acute problems of climate change in general and global warming in particular.

¹¹⁷ www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/whats-new/feature-story41.html/ October 23, 2002.

¹¹⁸ David G.Hallman, “Report on the World Summits on Sustainable Development (WSSD) Johannesburg, South Africa, August 26 to September 4, 2002,” in <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/wssd.thml>. November 5, 2002.

It was officially called the United Nations Climate Change Conference and it was the largest world summit conference on this issue ever held. Official representatives of 192 countries were present as well as around 46.000 accredited participants representatives of organizations of the civil society concerned with these questions. At the opening session, the Danish Prime Minister, Lars Rasmussen, described the Summit as an opportunity the world cannot afford to miss. To highlight the seriousness of the moment, Rajendra Pachauri, the chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), already argued that “if there’s no action before 2012, that’s too late. What we do in the next two to three years will determine our future. This is a defining moment.”¹¹⁹

The gathering was basically aimed to produce a new international climate deal that would replace the Kyoto protocol and agreements. As the specific issue of climate change is dealt with below, the results and shortcomings of the Copenhagen world conference will be discussed in greater detail in that section.

These international documents and gatherings highlighted both the urgency of the situation as well as the main issues/signs that threatens the well being of our global village, the planet Earth. A closer look at some of them will complete the picture. Nevertheless, global treaties and agreements only are not

¹¹⁹As referred to in Friedman, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, 43.

enough. As Friedman reminds his readers, “[I]f I’ve learned anything about ecology in researching this book, it is this: *All conservation is local.*”¹²⁰

The Warning Signs of a World Gone Awry

On the eve of the twenty-first century, the human experiment and the biosphere that has sustained it stand in profound jeopardy... Those with the greatest power seemed determined to refuse to take these danger signs seriously and instead, plan to keep “business as usual” in place, even as the capacity of the planet to sustain such ‘business’ erodes. Yet our task is not to indulge in apocalyptic despair, but to continue the struggle to reconcile justice in human relations with sustainable life community on earth.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God*.

He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be a fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.”

Matthew 16: 2-3

The gospels report that Jesus once reproached the religious leaders of his day for being able to read the signs of the weather but not the signs of the times (Matt 16:2-3). Today, it seems, the two are rather more evidently linked.

Marlin VanElderen¹²¹

The historical overview of the way the international community dealt with fundamental questions of survival for our planet Earth, invites us to move into a more focused analysis of some of the specific issues. The Worldwatch

¹²⁰ Ibid., 303. Emphasis original. The author calls for the creation of a million Noah’s arks to preserve the different ecosystems and argues that “all the locals are increasingly connected,” 314.

¹²¹ In the Editorial of *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 49, n.2 (1997): 130.

Institute, for example, has published annually the *State of the World, Report on Report on Progress toward a Sustainable Society*.¹²² The issues highlighted there cover a vast array of problems that have the potential to threaten the future of both humankind and “otherkind,” such as overpopulation (1984); decommissioning nuclear power plants (1986); reducing hunger (1987); conservation of biological diversity (1987 and 1992); mass extinction of species (1988); the depletion of the ozone layer (1989); global warming (1990); consumerism and its effects on a planet of limited resources (1991); water scarcity (1993); climate change (1996); toxic waste (2002); innovations for a sustainable economics (2008); into a warmer world (2009), and *Transforming Cultures: From Consumerism to Sustainability* (2010). Nonetheless, it took twenty years for the Institute to include a chapter on the role of religion in this particular area: “Engaging Religion in the Quest for a Sustainable World” (2003).¹²³

Other international institutions and organizations have also called attention to some of the fundamental problems faced by large sectors of the world’s population, such as hunger¹²⁴; unemployment¹²⁵; social marginalization and

¹²² The Mission Statement of the Institute reads as follows: “The Worldwatch Institute is an independent research organization that works for an environmentally sustainable and socially just society, in which the needs of all people are met without threatening the health of the natural environment or the well-being of future generations.” www.Worldwatch.org/ November 4, 2004.

¹²³ See Gary Gardner, “Engaging Religion in the Quest for a Sustainable World,” in *The State of the World 2003. A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society*, ed., Linda Starke (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 152-175.

¹²⁴ The U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) announced on 25 November 2003 in the *State of the Food Insecurity in the World 2003*, that “latest estimates signal a setback in the war against hunger. Worldwide...842 million people were undernourished in 1999-2001. www.fao.org/ November 26, 2003. On 16-18

exclusion¹²⁶; the lack of basic sanitation and health care, etc. For some, one of the cruelest realities of late global capitalism is the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor.¹²⁷ This entails devastating consequences for millions of people. Current patterns of resource consumption are alarming: less than 20% of the world's population consumes more than 80% of the available resources.¹²⁸ The world today is characterized by the pervasive presence of inequality and injustices. US ethicist Karen Lebacqz speaks of the "reign of injustice," and states that "because of the history of injustice that dominates

November 2009, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) organized a World Food Summit to address the global food insecurity situation that has worsened and continues to represent a serious threat for humanity. On the eve of the World Trade Organization Ministerial meeting, a new book highlights the need for a fundamental reshaping of international trade and investment rules to put human rights, particularly the right to adequate food, at the centre of economic and development policy. The book, *The Global Food Challenge*, ed. Sophia Murphy and Armin Paasch (Germany, 2009), with contributions by leading civil society trade experts at the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA), FoodFirst Information and Action Network (FIAN), the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), Brot für Alle, Brot für die Welt, Germanwatch and Heinrich Böll Foundation, calls on governments to bear in mind their obligation to respect, protect and realize the right to food when negotiating new trade agreements. The number of undernourished people in the world has set a scandalous new record of one billion in 2009, in spite of a record grain harvest in 2008. See <http://www.e-alliance.ch>. 23 December 2009.

¹²⁵ *Clarín*, the Buenos Aires newspaper, informs that the International Labor Office (ILO), in its 2003 report, states that 185.9 million people in the world were unemployed, and that this figure sets a sad new historical record on the matter. www.clarin.com/ 29 January 2004. Five years later, the same organization forecasts that by the end of 2009, world unemployment would rise by thirty million to fifty million – from a 2008 total of 189 million to a range of 220/239 million. See <http://dlc.org/ndol/>. 9 December 2009.

¹²⁶ According to a 2007 report of the World Bank, 2.4 billion people are living on two USD a day or less. See Friedman, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, 40.

¹²⁷ The Brundtland Report (page 6) already made clear that "inequality is the planet's main environmental problem."

¹²⁸ It is estimated that one individual in the USA has the consumptive impact of 280 persons in Haiti. See Larry Yoder, "Making the Case for Environmental Justice as a Central Theme of Christian Ethics in the 21st Century." See <http://gosehn.edu/larryry/larryp.htm> October 23, 2004. It is obvious that this estimate was made well before the devastating earthquake that hit Haiti in January 12, 2010.

the world biblical remembrance yields a different image for the oppressed and for the oppressor.”¹²⁹

It is not uncommon for scholars, ethicists, and theologians to include and discuss their own selection of issues related to the threats to life, in many instances as a prolegomena to the central focus of their research.¹³⁰ In the following, I will focus first on two fundamental issues that constitute the object of two of the framework Conventions adopted by UNCED, namely, climate change and biological diversity. Later, and in order to draw attention to the interconnection of the issues, I will include reflections on two major areas, namely, availability and access to water and the growing gap between the rich and the poor. I will include both global and local aspects of the problems under discussion, placing particular emphasis on the region from which I come and know best.

¹²⁹ Karen Lebacqz, *Justice in an Unjust World: Foundations for a Christian Approach to Justice* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 10, 122.

¹³⁰ See, *inter alia*, Lester Brown, *Building a Sustainable Society* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), 13-136; Lester Brown, *Eco-Economy: Building and Economy for the Earth* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 27-73; Calvin B. DeWitt, *Earth-Wise: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: CRC Publications, 1994), 27-38; Celia Deane-Drummond, *A Handbook in Theology and Ecology* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 1-14; Carol J. Dempsey and Russel A. Butkus, ed., *All Creation is Groaning: An Interdisciplinary Vision for Life in a Sacred Universe* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 99-125; Peter de Vos and others, ed., *Earthkeeping in the Nineties* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub.Co., 1991), 19-108; Wesley Grandberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 3-25; James Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 23-63; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 85-111; R.L. Sarkar, *The Bible, Ecology and Environment* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 206-268; David E. Toolan, *At Home in the Cosmos* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 75-125, and Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008), 1-15.

Climate Change.¹³¹

*Cambia todo cambia
Cambia lo superficial
Cambia también lo profundo
Cambia el modo de pensar
Cambia todo en este mundo.*

*Cambia el clima con los años
Cambia el pastor su rebaño
Y así como todo cambia
Que yo cambie no es extraño.
Cambia todo cambia
Cambia todo cambia*
Julio Numhauser¹³²

The Churches' involvement in the issue of climate change stems from our belief that God created and loves this world. We believe that God intends that humans, as an integral part of creation, should live in a wholesome relationship to the rest of creation so as not the cause such destruction that species, ecosystems, and indeed large numbers of people are threatened.

David G. Hallman¹³³

Charles, Frances, Ivan, Jeanne, and Karl are “named” tropical storms and hurricanes that in a period of approximately six weeks, starting on August 25, 2004, devastated several Caribbean island nations as well as the southeastern states of the USA. According to reports, in Florida only, responses to the storms resulted in the largest Red Cross operation in history. Four hurricanes

¹³¹ The Framework Convention, in its Article 1, defines it as “a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods.”

¹³² Chilean songwriter and folk singer, founder of the famous vocal group, *Quilapayún*.

¹³³ “Climate Change and Ecumenical Work for Sustainable Community,” in *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response*, ed. Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 125.

of such magnitude in forty-four days had not been seen since 1986. They left hundreds of people dead. Thousands others were injured and property losses are in the billions of dollars. Hurricane Katrina smashed New Orleans on August 29, 2005 and was considered one of the most powerful storms ever to strike the region.

The period between 1970 and 1974, averaged less than two major hurricanes a year. In 1995, there were nineteen named Atlantic Ocean storms, the second busiest season on record (1933 was the highest with twenty-one). The last years of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first century have followed a similar pattern. Stanley Goldenberg, a research meteorologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Miami, believes that the reason for this trend “lies in a broad 1 to 1.5 grade Fahrenheit rise in sea-surface temperatures that have occurred in the mid-1990s.”¹³⁴ Dr. Rubén Bejarán, who holds the chair of Climatology at the University of Buenos Aires, states that “There is no doubt that there is a ‘warm anomaly’ in the Atlantic Ocean that has generated these monsters in such a short period of time.”¹³⁵

The September 2004 issue of *National Geographic* magazine carried the title “Global Warning” a play of words regarding the problem of global warming. The main featured article is entitled *The Heat is On*. The editor--conscious that some of his readers may react against the magazine and even terminate their membership --warns that what it portrays isn’t science fiction or a Hollywood

¹³⁴ J. Madeleine Nash, “Force of Nature,” *Time Magazine*, 20 September 2004, 47.

¹³⁵ Silvina Heguy, “Huracanes: Las causas de la inusual ola que arrasa al Caribe y a EE.UU.” www.clarin.com/ September 18, 2004. My translation.

movie. Rather it is hard truth as scientists see it. Besides global warming, there is the dilemma of heavier rainfall in some areas, with persistent droughts in others; heat waves in some regions and coldest seasons in others, oceans are warming, coral reefs are dying, and seasons arrive later or earlier than normal. Unpredictable climate patterns seem to have become the only predictable option.

Under the umbrella of Climate Change, there are various related issues, such as global warming, the greenhouse effect, the thinning of the ozone layer, and the changes in weather patterns. They all point to human activities as the fundamental cause affecting the world climate.¹³⁶ Global warming can be seen both as a consequence and as a sign of climate change. Gradually, the more precise term, “climate change”, is preferred and used more and more as a subject that covers and includes all the others.¹³⁷

What is going on and why is it important? The interpretation of the data gathered by diverse groups of scientists working in relation to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) shows that one of the main reasons for temperature increase is due to more than 150 years of the industrialization process: the burning of growing quantities of fossil

¹³⁶ See the various articles on each of these phenomena in www.envirolink.org

¹³⁷ Due to its critical importance, climate change is one of the four priority themes selected by the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) for its regional ongoing program on “Environmental Citizenship” launched at the end of 2003. For a fuller description of the CLAI program, see Alfredo Salibián, “Ecología 2004: Compromiso de las Iglesias Cristianas,” *El Estandarte Evangélico* (Julio/Agosto 2004): 4-8.

fuels, the cutting of forests, and the preference for certain farming methods.¹³⁸

The “Greenhouse gases” (carbon dioxide [CO₂], methane and nitrous oxide) occur naturally in the atmosphere and they play a fundamental role for the existence of life on earth. That is, they keep some of the sun’s warmth from reflecting back into space. Without the effects of this “shield,” the Earth would be a cold and a barren place. What is the problem, then? As the Argentine song–writer Alberto Cortez puts it: *Ni poco ni demasiado, todo es cuestión de medida*.¹³⁹ Reliable scientific information made available by the UNFCCC, demonstrates how the increasing quantities of these gases are pushing the global temperature to artificially high levels and thus altering the climate. In 1996, after the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC in Berlin, Christopher Flavin, from the Worldwatch Institute, affirmed that “By 1995, the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has reached 360 parts per million (ppm)--higher than at any time in the past

¹³⁸ Basic information and sources for this section can be found in http://unfccc.int/essential_background/items/ November 15, 2004.

¹³⁹ Because of its beauty and wisdom the poem deserves to be included in full:

No siempre gana distancia
el hombre que más camina.
A veces, por ignorancia,
andar se vuelve rutina.
No por gastar los zapatos
se sabe más de la vida.
Ni poco ni demasiado,
todo es cuestión de medida.

No siempre está satisfecho
el hombre con lo que tiene
Si muchos son los derechos,
muchos también los deberes.
A veces lo más deseado
es una fruta prohibida.
Ni poco ni demasiado,
todo es cuestión de medida.

No siempre gasta su tiempo
aquel que más tiempo gasta.
No hay que pujar a destiempo
para ganar la subasta.
Las horas del apurado,
siempre son horas perdidas.
Ni poco ni demasiado,
todo es cuestión de medida

No siempre es la barba blanda
la que mejor se rasura.
Para una buena navaja
no importa la barba dura,
depende si el afilado
lo sabe hacer el que afila
Ni poco ni demasiado,
todo es cuestión de medida.

150.000 years--and far above the 280 ppm that existed when fossil fuel burning begun.”¹⁴⁰ By mid 2009, the concentration of CO₂ reached 378ppm.¹⁴¹

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) noted that

Since 1860... the concentration of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere grew by 32%...every year, an estimate of 6.600 tons of human generated carbon dioxide (CO₂) are dumped into the atmosphere. Only half of it is absorbed by the sea and the plants, but the rest remains on the air and accumulates there. The life span of CO₂ can reach up to 200 years.¹⁴²

The current warming trend has also the capacity to cause floods in coastal areas, where vast human populations reside, and could even cause the disappearance of entire island nations, particularly, but not only, in the Pacific and Indian Oceans.¹⁴³ Floods also may occur as ice caps and glaciers are melting at an unusual speed. Patterns of cultivation, regular seasons, and

¹⁴⁰ Christopher Flavin, “Facing Up to the Risks of Climate Change,” in *State of the World 1996: A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 22.

¹⁴¹ See <http://www.350.org>. 23 December 2009. In preparation to the Copenhagen COP 15 Summit in December 2009, a world-wide campaign under the title “350” was launched. 350 is the number that leading scientists say is the safe upper limit for carbon dioxide in our atmosphere. 350 ppm—it's the number humanity needs to get back to as soon as possible to avoid runaway climate change.

¹⁴² “Clima: Todo Cambiará.” *Nuevo Siglo* (Quito), December 2003-January 2004, 19. My translation.

¹⁴³ Tuvalu, in the South Pacific, is reported to have already started to formulate evacuation plans. Male, the capital of the Maldives, in the Indian Ocean, tops out at an elevation of less than eight feet. Furthermore, *Time Magazine* (October 4, 2004) reports that Shishmaref, the Inupiaq Eskimo village located 625 miles north of Anchorage, Alaska, has lost one hundred feet to three hundred feet of coastline, half of it since 1997.

habitats for both humans and animals alike are deeply affected by the climate change.¹⁴⁴

These facts have deep implications for present and future generations alike. There is no doubt that these phenomena teach us about the way human beings have (dis)organized the world today. Hallman, argues that “climate change provides a useful case study of the ecological threats to creation and the economic and social inequities within and between societies caused by economic systems and practices.”¹⁴⁵ Moreover, he argues elsewhere that “though climate change is a global problem, people are not equally responsible for causing it...We must make a distinction between the ‘luxury emissions of the rich’ and the ‘survival emissions of the poor.’”¹⁴⁶

On May 19, 2004, in a statement issued jointly by scientists and religious leaders of the U.S.A., the moral dimensions of the question were clearly highlighted. According to the report “Global warming is a universal global challenge”. The document recognizes the particular responsibility of the USA in this area, indicating that

¹⁴⁴ Andrew C. Revkin writes that “A comprehensive four-year study of warming in the Arctic shows that heat-trapping gases from tailpipes and smokestacks around the world are contributing to profound environmental changes, including sharp retreats in glaciers and sea ice... the consequences of the fast-paced Arctic warming will be global.” *The New York Times*, 30 October 2004. Moreover, Argentine biological scientist, Irene Schloss, comments that the Antarctic Peninsula is one of the areas that suffered higher temperature increases. This had led to the diminishing of about 80% of the krill (*euphausia superba*) population since the 70’s. This small crustacean is the basic food for whales, seals, penguins and other sea birds of the area. www.Clarin.com, November 4, 2004.

¹⁴⁵ Hallman, “*Ecumenical Responses to Climate Change*,” 131.

¹⁴⁶ “Globalization and climate change,” in www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/climate.html. 28 March 2007.

with 4% of the world's population, we have contributed 25% of the increased greenhouse gas concentration which causes global warming... the impacts of climate change will fall disproportionately upon developing countries and the poor persons within all countries, and thereby will exacerbate inequities in health status and access to adequate food, clean water, and other resources.¹⁴⁷

As mentioned earlier, one of the agreements reached at the UNCED was precisely the Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC), which is a legally binding document for the 165 states that signed it. The ultimate objective of the Convention was, according to its article 2,

the stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. Such a level should be achieved within a time-frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.

The Convention sets out principles and general commitments for all the parties involved and in its article 3, it recognizes the “differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities” of “developed” and “developing” countries.

As a result of its work, the Conference of the Parties (COP), agreed to establish in 1997 the Kyoto Protocol, an agreement promoting the strongest measures to limit carbon dioxide emissions. In its attempt to stop global warming, it was expected that the Protocol would affect all major sectors of the economy and other related areas.¹⁴⁸ A few countries refused to reatify the

¹⁴⁷ “Earth’s Climate Embraces us All: A Plea for Religion and Science for Action on Global Climate Change.” www.wcc-coe.org/jpc. 5 July 2004.

¹⁴⁸ In his book *Eco-Economy: Building an Economy for the Earth* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), Lester Brown proposed measures to change the current economic paradigm. In particular, he refers to projects dealing with the building of a

Kyoto protocol, among them, the United States of America, the country which releases into the atmosphere the largest amount of CO₂ in the world. Very soon, the limits of the Kyoto protocol became evident. Few voices question today the seriousness of the scientific findings concerning climate change. Physicist Joseph Romn, acting general secretary in the Clinton administration and author of *Hell and High Water*, argues that “the only important holes left in the science of climate change are whether it will be ‘serious or catastrophic’ and whether we will reach that point sooner rather than later.”¹⁴⁹

The Copenhagen summit meeting on December 2009 (COP 15) was planned to produce--*inter alia*-- an agreement which would replace the Kyoto protocol and establish stricter limits to CO₂ emissions. Almost at the end of the sessions of the Summit, ecumenical media leaders issued a statement highlighting the need to take firm decisions and linking the climate change issue with the question of basic justice and structural change. They affirmed that “Climate justice is a visionary principle that will help us to alleviate the unequal burdens created by climate change. It calls for the fair treatment of all people through policies and projects that address climate change and the structures that create and perpetuate inequalities.”¹⁵⁰

solar/hydrogen economy, recycling, eradicating hunger, protecting forest products and services, and redesigning cities for people.

¹⁴⁹ As mentioned in Friedman, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, 116.

¹⁵⁰ See www.waccglobal.org/News. December 19, 2009.

By most accounts, the final results were considered to be a failure.¹⁵¹ Playing with words, what was expected to be “*Hopenhagen*”, turn out to be “*Floopenhagen*.” The summit meeting was not a scientific gathering, but rather a political one. The failure points to a serious shortcoming of the governance of the world community and show the shortsightedness of the leaders to see beyond their own short- term narrow economic and political interests. The last-minute final agreement is non-binding and makes no commitments to reduce emissions to keep the temperature raise in check. The Spanish daily newspaper *El País* said that the result was a “rachitic agreement.”¹⁵² The summit basically agreed to limit the increase of the average world temperature to 2 degrees Celsius. The Secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change issued a press release which states that “in order to achieve this goal, the accord specifies that industrialized countries will commit to implement, individually or jointly, quantified economic-wide emissions targets from 2020, to be listed in the accord before 31 January 2010.”¹⁵³ All countries were also called to sign the agreement and make a specific commitment to reduce CO₂ emissions by 2020. At 31 of January, only eighty seven from the one hundred and

¹⁵¹ On behalf of the World Council of Churches (WCC), Guillermo Kerber, the WCC’s Program Executive for Climate Change, issued a statement saying that “with a lack of transparency, the agreement... was negotiated without consensus but rather in secret among the powerful nations of the World.” The statement further states that “this has been a strong strike against multilateralism and the democratic principles in the U.N system.” See WCC e-news, December 21, 2009. The Forum of Indigenous Peoples for Climate Change commented that “Binding commitments are needed to protect our forest, biodiversity, air and water... The Indigenous Peoples express disappointment and frustration for the lack of progress at the meeting on Climate change... It is nothing less that our own survival which is a stake here.” See Agencia Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Publicaciones (ALC), December 21, 2009. English translation mine.

¹⁵² *El País (Madrid)*, December 19, 2009.

¹⁵³ See WCC Climate Change Newsletter 49, e-news, December 2009.

ninety two countries have responded.¹⁵⁴ The Copenhagen meeting also decided to make available ten billion US dollars per year--between 2010-2012-- to help the most vulnerable countries face the effects of climate change. It also agreed to make available up to one hundred billion US dollars per year up to 2020 for the same purpose.

Nobel Peace Prize winner, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, remarked that it is urgent that negotiations among all countries are resumed with the objective to have clear reductions targets for industrialized countries to decrease by 40% CO₂ emissions by 2020 and an annual fund of 150 billion US dollars to be allocated for adaptation in the most vulnerable developing countries.¹⁵⁵ Confronted with an unparalleled crisis and facing enormous expectations from the people, the leaders of the world community have lost another opportunity in Copenhagen. Dutch diplomat, Ivo de Boer, Executive Secretary for Climate Change of the UN (UNFCCO), resigned two months after the end of the meeting and this resignation was interpreted as a reaction to the failure of the conference. The next annual COP meeting is scheduled to take place in Mexico by the end of 2010.

Biodiversity.

*If the Lord would have consulted me before the
Creation, I would have recommended something*

¹⁵⁴ As reported by the Spanish newspaper *El País* on February 6, 2010.

¹⁵⁵ See WCC e-news, December 21, 2009.

simpler.

Alfonso el Sabio, King of Castilla, XIIth century

*When you have cut down all the trees
And killed off all the buffalo,
And taken the last fish from the river,
Then I hope you can eat all your money.*

A Mohawk woman to Teddy Roosevelt

Life on earth is the product of billions of years of evolution. The extraordinarily rich web of life, with all of its complexity and interrelationships with the variety of ecosystems, has been compared to a great tapestry filled with different drawings, forms, and colors. But it seems that lately, the tapestry is showing alarming signs of wear and tear, far beyond what is considered “normal.”

Evangelical scientist and scholar, Calvin B. DeWitt, director of Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, recounts his story

When I was in the ninth grade, I recall learning that there were a total of 1 million different kinds of living creatures. By the time I was in graduate school, I remember learning that there were 5 million species. Today [in 1994] there are between 5 million and 40 million species of living things on our earth! The biodiversity of earth is so great that we realize that we are just beginning to name the creatures. Thus far we have named only about 1.5 million of these species.¹⁵⁶

No one really knows how many life forms there are on the planet. Already back in 1992, scientists spoke of a number between ten and eighty million.¹⁵⁷

Biodiversity is a short form for the term biological diversity, that is, the diversity of plants, animals and microorganisms on land and in the oceans. At the

¹⁵⁶ Calvin B. DeWitt, *Earth Wise: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues*, 20.

¹⁵⁷ John C. Ryan, “Conserving Biological Diversity,” in *State of the World 1992. A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 9.

UNCED in 1992, the Convention on Biological Diversity (COB) agreed upon a definition of “biological diversity.” It is referred to as “the variability among living organisms from all sources including, *inter alia*, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems.”¹⁵⁸ The writers of *Global Biodiversity Assessment*, a massive volume on the issue,¹⁵⁹ are fully aware that the term biodiversity has been used sometimes in a looser fashion and recognize that different interests may perceive it differently. They argue, however, that this fact can “be considered a strength in making biodiversity a unifying concept, bringing together people from different disciplines and interests with a common goal – the understanding, conservation and wise use of biological diversity and resources.”¹⁶⁰

Putting the strict scientific language aside for a moment, Elizabeth Dowdeswell, former Executive Director of the UNEP, reminds her readers that, “biodiversity is part of our daily lives and livelihoods and constitutes the resources upon which families, communities, nations and future generations depend.”¹⁶¹ That is, our very existence as human beings and our own personal and communal health literally depends on the continuous supply of what is called the “goods and services” provided by the different ecosystems, a fact

¹⁵⁸ Full text of the Convention can be found at www.biodiv.org/convention/articles.asp . November 10, 2004. The dictionary Biologyreference.com, in turn, defines biodiversity as “the sum total of life on Earth; the entire global complement of terrestrial, marine, and freshwater biomes and ecosystems, and the species—plants, animals, fungi, and microorganisms—that live in them, including their behaviors, interactions, and ecological processes. Biodiversity is [also] linked directly to the nonliving components of the planet—atmosphere, oceans, freshwater systems, geological formations, and soils—forming one great, interdependent system, the biosphere.”

¹⁵⁹ V.H. Heywood (Executive Editor) and R. T. Watson (Chair), *Global Biodiversity Assessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 21-106.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, vii.

that we often take for granted. According to a UN study, these goods and services include: provision of food, fuel and fiber; provision of shelter and building materials; the purification of air and water; the detoxification and decomposition of wastes; cultural and aesthetic benefits; the pollination of plants, including many crops; the ability to adapt to change; the control of pests and diseases; stabilization and moderation of the Earth climate; moderation of floods, droughts, temperature extremes and the forces of wind; generation and renewal of soil fertility, including nutrient cycling, etc.¹⁶²

This extraordinary richness of the complex reality of life is confronted, however, with a serious and no less complex problem: the dramatic and hitherto unknown speed of the extinction of species, mainly due to human activities. Scientists remind us that for thousands of years humans have been a principal cause of species extinctions. They claim that in the history of biodiversity, there always have been extinctions, with the consequent impoverishment of life on earth. Moreover, scientists also have shown that fossil records reveal that most species are rather ephemeral and that more than 95% of species that formerly existed are now extinct. Furthermore, there have been rebounds from mass extinctions. They are ecologically slow but geologically rapid. In these cases, the recovery of biodiversity “typically requires 5-10 million years.”¹⁶³ Given all these scientific data, there is still one *but*, and it is a very important one: I. Hanski, J. Clover and W. Reid argue that “our current concern about biodiversity stems largely from the judgment that the present rate of species extinction is extremely high in comparison with the natural average (background) rate... in mammals, is roughly 100 times higher...in other *taxa* the discrepancy may be even

¹⁶² Convention on Biological Diversity: www.biodiv.org/doc/publications/guide.asp?id=net/ 25 February 2005.

¹⁶³ *Global Biodiversity Assessment*, 197.

greater.”¹⁶⁴ In birds, for example, it is one thousand times greater.¹⁶⁵ These findings are supported by the data compiled by the World Conservation Monitoring Centre, the most comprehensive source of information on extinctions and threats of extinctions. An update made at the very end of the twentieth century shows, for example, that the number of critically endangered primates rose from thirteen in 1996 to nineteen in the year 2000. Nearly half of the six hundred known species of primates other than humans are threatened with extinction, according to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).¹⁶⁶ The World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) publishes the Living Planet Report, a periodic update of the world ecosystems as measured by the Living Planet Index (LPI), which is the average of three ecosystem-based indices. In July 2002, it was reported that over the last thirty years (1970-2000), “the forest species population index declined by about 15%, the marine species population index declined by about 35%, while the freshwater population index dropped 55%.”¹⁶⁷ An update done in 2003 claims that 12,259 species are threatened with extinction, compared with 11,167 in 2002. Peru and Brazil are among the countries with the highest number of threatened birds and mammals.¹⁶⁸ Friedman cites Conservation International, which estimates that “one species is now going extinct every twenty minutes, which is a thousand times faster than the norm during most of the earth’s history.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁴ “Generation, Maintenance, and Loss of Biodiversity,” in *ibid.*, 232.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁶⁶ See IUCN, “Confirming the Global Extinction Crisis.” Press release, Gland, Switzerland, 28 September 2000. Source: IUCN Website: www.iucn.org/. For a synthesis of the situation of other animals (primates, birds, fish, amphibians, etc.), see also Brown, *Eco-Economy: Building and Economy for the Earth*, 68-73.

¹⁶⁷ Living Planet Report 2002, in www.wwf.org. 14 October 2004.

¹⁶⁸ www.Clarin.com 30 November 2003.

¹⁶⁹ *Hot, flat, and Crowded*, 141.

To provide concrete examples from Latin America concerning amphibians-- considered to be the best indicator that nature has concerning environmental health-- a study developed by the IUCN showed that in Colombia, for example, 208 species are seriously threatened with extinction. Colombia is followed by Mexico with 191, Ecuador with 163, and Brazil with 110 species.¹⁷⁰ In my own country, Argentina, there are some 476 animal species that risk extinction.¹⁷¹ The country also has lost 70% of its native forests in the last seventy years, with the corresponding loss of its rich biodiversity. The forests covered a total of 1.100.000 square kilometers in 1935. They have been reduced to only 330.000 in 2004, according to a study carried out by the National Secretariat for Environment and Sustainable Development.¹⁷² A consequent threat to the endemic fauna and flora is becoming evident. The same Secretariat reports that in Argentina, there are four hundred and seventy-six animal species that risk extinction.¹⁷³

Today, the extent and the speed of species extinction is of such magnitude that it has become impossible to foresee the final results, except to say that this path leads to utter destruction. For the first time in the history of the planet, and unlike previous destructions, this devastation is basically anthropogenic,

¹⁷⁰ www.Clarin.com 15 October 2004.

¹⁷¹ One can cite, among others, the armadillo (*dasydus novemcinctus*), the yaguareté (*panthera onca*), the red deer or deer of the pampas, the short short-tailed chinchilla (*abrocoma cinerea*), the huemul (*hippocamelus bisulcus*), the tatú (*priodontes maximus*), and the ranita de Somuncurá, an endemic species, uniquely found in the area. Source: IUCN, as reported by *Clarín*, 29 April 2004. Biodiversity tables by regions and countries giving full lists of globally threatened species: mammals, birds and higher plants as well as amphibians, reptiles, and freshwater fish can also be found in *World Resources: A Guide to Global Environment* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 322-325.

¹⁷² www.Clarin.com. 30 April 2004.

¹⁷³ As reported by Gabriel Guibellino, www.Clarin.com 29 April 2004.

that is, caused by humans. One very late species, or, as previously mentioned, a sector of it, is inflicting death on many other species. Brazilian Leonardo Boff, refers to it in this graphic way: “a death machine is mowing down life in its most varied forms.”¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, at the International Conference on Biodiversity, held in Paris, in January 2004, Klaus Toepfer, the Executive Director of the UNEP sounded almost apocalyptic. He stated that “the world today lives an unprecedented crisis since the extinction of the dinosaurs.”¹⁷⁵ The ecocide described in the biblical book of Revelation looks like an understatement comparatively.

The causes of the phenomena are multiple and interrelated. They range from a shortsighted understanding of the value of life, through a distorted view of economic development as unlimited growth, to the striving for maximum profit in the shortest time possible. Human beings have put such weight on a particular ecologically-destructive use of science and technology that practically life itself is offered on the altar of this new Moloch.

The international community decided to deal with the issue head-on and agreed to a Convention on Biodiversity (COB). The Convention has three main goals: the conservation of biodiversity, the sustainable use of the components of biodiversity, and the sharing of benefits arising from the commercial and other utilization of genetic resources in a fair and equitable way. The preamble affirms that “the conservation of biological diversity is a common concern for humankind.”¹⁷⁶ The text includes the need to “promote

¹⁷⁴ Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 1.

¹⁷⁵ www.welpais.com 25 January 2004. My translation.

¹⁷⁶ Convention on Biological Diversity: www.biodiv.org/doc/publications/guide.asp?id=net/

international technical and scientific cooperation in the field of conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.”¹⁷⁷ At the time of its approval (June 1992), one hundred and fifty seven countries were signatories of the Convention.

It is evident that the two issues that have been addressed thus far cannot be considered in isolation. A sound ecological approach would warrant viewing the issues in terms of their interrelationships and interconnectedness. *Global Diversity in a Changing Environment*, a detailed study developing future scenarios of biodiversity for the twenty-first century, affirms, in connection with these two issues discussed by both Conventions, that more and more the scientific community is convinced that “there is increasing evidence to suggest that the two broad concerns are intertwined and mutually dependent. Past changes in the biodiversity of the Earth have both responded to and caused changes in the Earth’s environment.”¹⁷⁸ To continue raising awareness on the issue, the United Nations has declared the year 2010 to be International Year of Biodiversity.¹⁷⁹

Availability and Use of Water

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., article 17.

¹⁷⁸ F. Stuart Chapin III, Osvaldo E. Sala, Elizabeth Huber-Sannwald, ed., *Global Diversity in a Changing Environment: Scenarios for the 21st Century* (New York: Springer, 2001), v.

¹⁷⁹ A full ongoing update with worldwide statistics and plans for 2010 can be found in the website of the United Nations Environmental Program, World Conservation Monitoring Centre <http://www.unep-wcmc.org>

*The cycle of life is intricately tied up with
the cycle of water, so that anything done
against water is a crime against life. The
water system has to remain alive if we are to
remain alive on this earth.*

Jacques-Ives Cousteau

*O healing river, send down your waters
Send down your waters upon this land
O healing river, send down your waters
And wash the blood from off the sand*

*This land is thirsting, this land is burning
No seed is growing in the barren ground
O healing river, send down your waters,
O healing river, send your waters down*

Fred Hellerman and Fran Minkoff

It is estimated that approximately 75% of the Earth is water. Yet, only 2.5% of the world's water is fresh, while the rest is sea and ocean water. Of the 2.5%, more than two-thirds is stored in glaciers, ice sheets, and mountainous areas. Only 0.3% of the freshwater is available from rivers, lakes and reservoirs, and 30% from the groundwater.¹⁸⁰ The adult human body is composed of approximately 55% to 60% water; the brain is composed of 70% water, as is the skin. While the lungs are almost 90% water, the blood is about 82% water. It is said that a person can survive about a month without food, but only 5-7 days without water.¹⁸¹ Water is, indeed, synonymous with life.

Let me include here a small anecdotal point. I was born and raised in a popular working class neighborhood of Buenos Aires, known as *La Boca*. It is so named because it is located where the River *Riachuelo* flows into the River Plate. The primary school where I studied is just twenty-five meters from the river bank. It

¹⁸⁰ 2003 International Year of Freshwater Website: www.wateryear2003.org.

¹⁸¹ www.thewaterpage.com/waterbasics.htm. 21 April 2005.

happens that the *Riachuelo* is famous for being “the most contaminated river in the world,” an infamous record that most probably has several competitors.¹⁸² A foul odor was a regular feature. The color of the water was black, due to the continuous spilling of oil from ships, nearby petrochemical industries and a thermo electrical power station. Studies have shown that the concentration of mercury, zinc, lead and chromium are fifty times the acceptable levels. The concentration of the bacterium *E Coli* is the same as in a sewer. Garbage freely floats on the surface of the water. It is said that if you fall into the river you do not drown, rather, you decay instead. The area has one of the highest levels of air pollution, and it is believed that it is one of the most vulnerable areas of the country. Some forty years later, I moved to Spain, and live in a small town called Guardamar del Segura. It is so named because it lies where the river Segura (“Tader” for the Romans and later “Guadalabiad” for the Arabs) flows into the Mediterranean Sea. When the wind blows from the east, the stench that comes from the river is unbearable. Paradoxically, my olfactory memory brings me back to my childhood years. It happened that, according to a study made by the University of Alicante, the Segura is the most contaminated river in Europe!¹⁸³ From their balconies, neighbors hang out banners which read “*Rio Segura, mierda pura*” [Rio Segura, pure dung].

During the twentieth century, the human population almost tripled, while, during the same time, global freshwater consumption rose sixfold.¹⁸⁴ Indeed, with the increase in the human population, and the increase of water consumption for basic

¹⁸² See the article “Riachuelo, en Argentina, el Río más contaminado del mundo.”, in Rebelión.org-ecología-040519-riachuelo.htm

¹⁸³ www.elda.org/en/proj/coral/demo/spain/formal/media/reportaje/emederp/05html

¹⁸⁴ Global Environmental Outlook (GEO) 2000. www.unep.net

needs such as drinking and sanitation, agriculture and industry, water has become an extremely valuable and scarce resource. It is estimated that 1.3 billion people lack access to an adequate supply of safe water and about 50% of the world population lacks adequate sanitation. One-third of the world's population lives in countries with moderate to high water stress. The problem is more acute in Africa and West Asia.¹⁸⁵ Lester Brown highlights the situation particularly in arid countries, such as India, China, Egypt and Pakistan, warning that "population growth is sentencing hundreds of millions of people to hydrological poverty – a local form of impoverishment that is difficult to escape."¹⁸⁶

The problem of water is not only quantity, but also quality. Pollution from industry, agriculture, lack of water treatment, etc. adds to the deterioration of the quality of freshwater. About two million tons of waste is dumped every day into rivers, lakes, and streams. Worldwide, polluted water is estimated to affect the health of about 1.200 million people and contributes to the death of approximately 15 million children under five years of age every year. Water- borne diseases, water-based diseases, water-related vector diseases (transmitted by mosquitoes and flies), and water-scarce diseases are countless.¹⁸⁷ Economist Jeffrey Sachs claims that "ten of millions of Bangladeshi citizens are being poisoned daily by drinking well water that is laden with natural arsenic."¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ The Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEA) Repository Website: <http://gdrc.org/ngo/mea/factsheets/fs4/html>

¹⁸⁶ *Eco-Economy: Building an Economy for the Earth*, 39-40

¹⁸⁷ For a detailed listing, see www.wateryear2003.org

¹⁸⁸ Jeffrey Sachs, "The Class System of Catastrophe," *Time*, January 10, 2005, 86.

At the end of the twentieth century, the Global Environmental Outlook estimated that “the declining state of the world’s freshwater resources, in terms of quantity and quality, may prove to be the dominant issue on the environment and development agenda of the coming century.”¹⁸⁹

Again, one has to see how and how much is water used differently by different people in the “global village” or aboard the “Titanic”. In many African countries, for instance, in the last three decades, each trip to collect water rose from an average of nine to twenty-one minutes. The average distance that women in Asia and Africa walk to collect water is six kilometers. One toilet flush in the northern “developed” countries uses as much water as the average person in a “developing” country uses for a whole day’s drinking, cooking, washing and cleaning.¹⁹⁰ The millions of gallons used to water golf links and gardens, to wash cars in the North and in the privileged areas of the South, would be enough to supply entire populations with the badly needed liquid.

In November 2002, the UN Committee responsible for the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights declared water as a human right. The text highlights three vulnerable and historically marginalized social sectors, particularly referred to as “individuals and groups who have traditionally faced difficulties in exercising this right” (point 16). They are: women, children and indigenous peoples.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ GEO-2000. www.unep.net

¹⁹⁰ From the factsheet for WSSD www.wcc-coe.org.jpc and www.wateryear2003.org/en/ev.php/

¹⁹¹ Full text can be found in www.waterobservatory.org

The UN has also decided to start in March 2005, the second Decade on Water, under the name International Decade for Action, “Water for Life,” 2005-2015.¹⁹² During the 1980s, the first decade was celebrated, and its slogan was “Water for All”. Studies about the living conditions of millions of people of the world indicate that they are, indeed, too far away from accomplishing that goal.

In between the two UN Decades on Water, a group of “eminent persons”, under the chairmanship of Mario Soares, former President of Portugal, met and agreed to issue a document entitled, “The Water Manifesto: A Right to Life.”¹⁹³ Reacting against a persistent tendency towards privatization of water and water services spearheaded by large multinational corporations, the Manifesto proclaims that “water belongs more to the economy of common goods and wealth sharing than to the economy of private and individual accumulation and other’s wealth expropriation.”¹⁹⁴ The Manifesto acknowledges that “it is time to go beyond the logic of ‘warlords’ and economic conflicts for the domination and conquest of markets” and remarks that if this trend continues, it “could only do harm to the objectives of access to water for all

¹⁹² Full text can be found in [http:// www.unesco.org/ water-celebrations /decades/ water-for-life.pdf/](http://www.unesco.org/water-celebrations/decades/water-for-life.pdf/)

¹⁹³ Full text can be found in www.waterobservatory.org/

¹⁹⁴ Frequent demonstrations against the privatization of water have been a recurring phenomenon in places like Honduras, Perú, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay. My own country, Argentina, is an example of this tendency towards privatization. Andrew Graham-Yooll wrote an article under the title “Argentina model in trouble, once an example to the world.” He makes a critical review of the privatization process. Argentina is one of the countries where there is no lack of freshwater. As part of the wave of privatization of goods and services undertaken in the 90s, water and water services were also privatized. It was promoted and advertised as a model for the rest of the world. Users were billed for consumption, and prices went up, more and more, due to the devaluation of the local currency. As more than 50% of the population lives under the threshold of poverty, water almost became a luxury. The story--told from the point of view of the users--has been a total catastrophe. See [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ ev/ php.id](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev/php.id).

and global integrated sustainability.”¹⁹⁵ The text also calls the attention to the fact that water has been a cause of wars, “because most States continue to use water as an instrument to support of their geo-economic strategic interests as region’s hegemonic powers.”¹⁹⁶ The Manifesto concludes with a number of proposals, among them, the establishment of a World Observatory for Water Rights, which “must become one of the world reference points for information on water rights, in support of the most effective forms of water partnership and solidarity.”¹⁹⁷

Civil societies throughout the world are responding to the water crisis in different ways. Concerned ecumenical organizations have also spoken and acted on the issue of water. A Statement of the Ecumenical Team to the 12th Session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, in April 2004, recounts the threats to the most vulnerable communities and puts forward theological and ethical foundations for water as a gift and right. It also suggests a number of advocacy issues and comments on the second UN Decade on Water.¹⁹⁸ In 2004 in Brazil, the annual national Catholic campaign *Fraternidade* 2004, had as its principal theme “Water: source of life.”

It is written in the book of the prophet, Isaiah,

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched and with thirst, I, the Lord, will answer them, I, the God of Israel will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys. (41:17-18)

¹³⁷ The Water Manifesto: A Right to Life.” In www.waterobservatory.org, article 6.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., Article 3.

¹⁹⁷ “The Water Manifesto”, final proposal.

¹⁹⁸ The document, is entitled *Water as Gift and Right*. Full text can be found in www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/water2pdf

Will this be real in the life of the people? Some have responded to the text in prayer and confession, saying:

The earth is a water planet
The seas are our amniotic fluid.
All life carries your creative waters,
People, vegetation, and animals.
When the water is polluted
It reacts against us and our future,
Therefore we cry: *Kyrie eleison*.¹⁹⁹

The Growing Gap between the Rich and the Poor.

Over the past few decades, life threatening environmental concerns have surfaced in the developing world...Yet at the same time these developing countries must operate in a world in which the resources gap between most developing and industrial nations is widening, in which the industrial world dominates in the rule-making of some key international bodies, and in which the industrial world has already used much of the planet's ecological capital. This inequality is the planet's main "environmental" problem; it is also its main "development" problem.

Our Common Future

The rich must live more simply so that the poor may simply live.

Charles Birch

There is enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed.

Mohandas Gandhi

Leonardo Boff argues that "the most threatened of nature's creatures today are

¹⁹⁹ "Preserving Water, Land, and Air." Prayers and liturgical suggestions for the Creation Time 2004, from September 1 to the second Sunday of October. See: www.wwc-coe.org.wshat/jpc/ecen-liturgicalpdf. 29 October 2004.

the poor.”²⁰⁰ Is this an ideologically driven overstatement or is it a reflection on the reality of our world? Immediately following, Boff provides statistics to substantiate his claim. Unfortunately, the impressive figures are already outdated, and the bad news is that the new figures look even worse. In the “global village”, at the same time that a newspaper advertised a pair of diamond studs for \$ 24,900,²⁰¹ and the T.V. informs us that a baseball bat with which Babe Ruth hit the first home run for the Yankees was auctioned for 1.26 million dollars, more than three billion people live on less than two dollars a day and 1.2 million people live on one dollar a day. Facts such as these are repugnant. Indian scholar, Anup Shah, has managed to gathered impressive statistics concerning world poverty and has produced a careful analysis of its main causes.²⁰² He singles out “structural adjustments”--a set of policies prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to the so called “debtor nations”--as a major cause of poverty.²⁰³

Brazilian Frei Betto, former adviser on hunger-related issues to President Luis Ignacio “Lula” da Silva, reminds his readers that, “four USA citizens: Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, Larry Ellison and Paul Allen have together a combined fortune that is greater than the Gross National Product of forty-two nations together, with a total population of six hundred million people.”²⁰⁴ Lula himself, speaking at the 2004 UN Assembly, noted that while in 1820 the ratio of the average *per capita* income between the richest country and the poorest was less than five, today it is greater than eighty.

²⁰⁰ Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 1.

²⁰¹ www.TheWallStreetJournal.com

²⁰² See www.globalissues.org.

²⁰³ This technical euphemism refers basically to the pressure on nations to cut social expenditures as a condition to receive loans to repay former loans.

²⁰⁴ “Sementes Mutantes,” *Nuevo Siglo* (Quito), Dec.2003/Enero 2004, 6.

In Argentina, for example, there are 5,735,000 persons who survive on .50 US dollars per day, while each of the 10% of the richest, lives on 430 dollars per month.²⁰⁵ In January 2004 in a session of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Darío Diaz, the Argentine leader of the unemployed people, the *piqueteros*, remarked that 48% of the wealth of the country is concentrated in 10% of the population. This group of people has an income of more than thirty-one times greater than those who are at the bottom of the economic-social scale.²⁰⁶

Ethicist John Nash noted the connections between the problem of economic inequities and the ecological crisis when he argues that “Only authentic economic equity among nations is sufficient to halt the spiraling degradation of nature. Global economic justice is an essential good in itself, but also an essential condition of ecological integrity.”²⁰⁷ It is to be noted that the process of economic globalization has not only contributed to the integration--though some would argue *disintegration*--of the economies of the poor countries with the economically developed countries around the world. It also has produced the concentration of wealth and profits in the hands of few transnational corporations and individuals. This situation has created an ever- widening gap between a rich minority and a poor majority.

Many see the problem as one of the unjust distribution of goods, resources and services in the world. Crucial as it is, one needs to go a step further, and analyze the underlying social, economic, and political structures that favor such system of unfairness and injustice. US Social ethicist, Iris Marion Young, makes a critical

²⁰⁵ www.Clarin.com 15 July 2004.

²⁰⁶ As reported by Edelberto Behs in the daily news service *Servicios de Noticias ALC*. www.alcnoticias.org/ 28 January 2005.

²⁰⁷ John Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Moral Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 54.

analysis of what she calls “the distributive paradigm.” For her, that paradigm only “defines social justice as the morally proper distribution of social benefits and burdens among society’s members.”²⁰⁸ Young argues for the need to have a broader framework from which to discuss issues related to economic and social injustices and, therefore, “to focus primarily on the social structures and processes that produce distribution rather than on the distribution.”²⁰⁹ Young makes a serious critique of the basic structural injustices of domination and oppression embedded in the capitalist system. From a different angle, Michael D. Yates, an activist and economist, is also critical of capitalism and signals how to resist its global stranglehold. He argues that

it should be clear...that most of the world’s people will have little or no chance to develop their full human capacities as long as there exist such significant wealth and income inequalities. A market system simply reinforces the inequalities that already exist, and the neoliberalism of the past thirty years has made equality much worse.²¹⁰

Yates considers himself part of the “minority” of scholars who is ready to question and confront the mainstream of economists who defend today’s globalized capitalism. From the perspective of the underside, of the workers and the unemployed, Yates studies capitalism in practice, and backed with facts and statistics, underlies the existing inequalities among nations, within countries as well as worldwide.²¹¹

In his doctoral dissertation at Union Theological Seminary in New York city, Gary Matthews, an US ethicist, speaks about the “capitalist dilemma.” He remarks that

²⁰⁸ Iris M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 16.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²¹⁰ Michael D. Yates, *Naming the System: Inequality and Work in the Global Economy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2003), 261.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, Particularly chapter 2, Capitalism and Inequality, 33-61.

today's global economy is putting us all in a profound double bind...In the first place, our fabulously productive, wealth creating global economic system is also immensely destructive. It is fragmenting our communities, undermining our politics, and destroying the planet biosphere. Secondly, the global economy is rapidly becoming one integral phenomenon.²¹²

In a similar vein, US scholar Christopher Flavin, using examples from Brazil, Philippines, India, and China, speaks about the co-existence, side by side, of “economic successes and social failures...in this supposed time of plenty.”²¹³

One of the foundational principles of the capitalist system is the private property of the means of production. In a persuasive account that traces back the history of the concept of property from ancient Greece and Rome to the present, German theologian Ulrich Duchrow, and his compatriot, economist Franz Hinkelammert, clearly show the linkages between the “destruction of nature and of social cohesion by private property in the context of neo-liberal globalization.”²¹⁴

Linkages between the economic globalization which produces the widening of the gap between rich and poor, and the devastation of the environment are many and varied. One can cite multinational corporations going to countries of the South and thereby avoiding the stricter environmental regulations of their home countries; the transportation of goods and materials over greater distances and the ensuing pollution; the destruction of rainforests to produce cash export crops or pasture lands for

²¹² See Gary R. Matthews, “Moral Power and the Capitalist Dilemma” (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, A Bell and Howell Co., 2000), 4, 246.

²¹³ Christopher Flavin, “Rich Planet, Poor Planet,” in *State of the World 2001. A Worldwatch Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society*, 6.

²¹⁴ Ulrich Duchow and Franz J. Hinkelammert, *Property for People, Not for Profit: Alternatives to the Global Tyranny of Capital* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), 90.

northern hamburgers, as in Brazil; “free trade” agreements restricting the capacity of governments to impose environmental regulations, etc.²¹⁵

This gap between the rich and the poor is present and felt at almost every level. A study released by the World Health Organization (WHO) draws attention to the fact that “despite significant gains in medical science, disparities in public health persist between rich and poor countries.... Half of the world’s deaths could be prevented with simple and cost effective interventions.”²¹⁶ According to Anup Shah, Latin America has the highest disparity rate in the world between the rich and the poor, indeed a highly questionable record.²¹⁷ In an article entitled, *La Dictadura terrorista mundial y América Latina en el siglo XXI*, Argentine journalist Stella Calloni, citing a report of the Inter-American Bank, affirms that “a hurricane has devastated what remained of the middle class...in the last twenty-five years, [in Latin America] almost 100 million people that belonged to the middle class, fell into poverty, and there are 59 million more destitute and indigent [people] that existed twenty years ago.”²¹⁸

And these figures are just not vague statistics or generalizations. They are concrete faces and colors. They are mainly women, particularly women of color, children, and indigenous peoples, the social sectors more affected by the process, and those who carry the heaviest and most disproportionate burden of all. They are the ones who experience the pain and suffering in the most acute form. They are the

²¹⁵ For a more detailed enumeration, see “Economic Globalization and Ecology” in www.wcc-coe.org/what/jpc/ecology.htm

²¹⁶ Elizabeth Malkin in www.nytimes.com 11 November 2004.

²¹⁷ Anup Shah, *Facts and Poverty*. <http://www.globalissues.org/issues/2/causes-of-poverty>. This web page contains all kinds of data and is update regularly. January 5, 2010.

²¹⁸ As reported in the daily electronic service *Ecupress* (Buenos Aires), 8 September 2004. My translation.

victims of a complicated economic system that produces havoc for people and the environment.

The latest global financial and economic crisis which started in 2007 in the USA (Wall Street and the sub-prime) was considered to be the most serious crisis since the 1929 depression. It was described by Sami Nair as “not just an economic crisis, but a systemic earthquake.”²¹⁹ Brazilian theologian, Walter Altmann, Moderator of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches stated in his 2009 address that “the world has been thrown into a financial crisis of catastrophic dimensions.” Furthermore, he added that “... under the impact of the crisis, the ideological assumption that the free-market and globalization process would bring about world-wide prosperity, has receded.”²²⁰ The result was a further widening of the gap between the rich and the poor, both inside nations and between nations and regions. Those most affected, as usual, were the poor. According to the FAO Summit meeting in Rome in November 2009, and due to the crisis, the number of poor people in the world increased from 880 million to 1.020 million.²²¹ Allen Wood once said:

But no one has ever denied that capitalism, understood as Marx’s theory understands it, is a system of unnecessary servitude, replete with irrationalities and ripe for destruction. Still less has anyone defended capitalism by claiming that a system of this sort might after all be good or desirable, and it is doubtful that any moral philosophy which could support such a claim would deserve serious consideration.²²²

²¹⁹ *El País*, December 19, 2009. Algerian-born Sami Nair is a highly respected academic, philosopher, and economist. He was a former member of the European Parliament from 1999 to 2004.

²²⁰ See Moderator’s Report. Unpublished paper, page 4.

²²¹ See www.Página12.com.ar/diario-economía-2-135401-2009-11-17.html.

²²² Allen Wood, “The Marxian Critique of Justice”, in Milton Fisk (ed.) *Justice: Key Concepts in Critical Theory* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), 178.

Conclusions.

This brief history of the concerns of the international community and the overview of the issues/signs and their interconnections, frame the context in which we live today. Signs such as these point beyond themselves, to realities and situations that have immediate consequences for us all. It is not just an academic exercise. These realities touch peoples' lives on a daily basis. They are signs of the so-called "ecological crisis," a crisis that by its magnitude and speed, threatens--perhaps for the first time in history-- the very life of the planet earth as a whole. The massive presence of injustice suffered by the majority of the world's population, and the voracious use of the limited resources of the planet by exploitation and overconsumption, constitute a lethal combination that exercises enormous pressure on the carrying capacity of the earth, to the point of threatening the whole web of life. As Lester Brown clearly showed, these signs and other signs with similar devastating trends, operate in a kind of synergy that "reinforce each other, accelerating the process."²²³

With the benefit of hindsight--and not without regretting it-- we need to take note of the shortcomings and of the failure of the international community to heed the call of these reports and conferences, and of many other subsequent attempts to squarely face these critical issues. One can detect a seemingly inability of the global community--particularly of some of its powerful members-- to come to terms with the urgency of the situation. Furthermore, fundamental questions need to be raised concerning the effectiveness of the mechanisms described hitherto. Where are "the

²²³ *Eco-Economy: Building and Economy for the Earth*, 72.

urgent desire of the peoples...and the duty of all Governments” and the “prompt agreements” requested by Stockholm? What has happened to the “spirit of global partnership to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth’s ecosystem,” as proclaimed by the Declaration in Rio? What has happened to the “commitment to building a humane and caring global society, cognizant of the need for human dignity for all,” as announced in Johannesburg? Can the peoples of the world afford the lack of governments’ concrete commitments and political will concerning climate change as witnessed in Copenhagen? Words and papers alone are not enough to address such critical situations. For how long can we afford to wait, before taking concrete steps and radical measures to stop the tendencies described above? Again, the words of Jeffrey Sachs are eloquent: “What the rich world suffers as hardships the poor world often suffers as mass death.”²²⁴ Bold actions are needed to tackle the problems head on and have the political, social and individual will to change what needs to be changed, undo trodden paths of destructive consequences and correct injustices to people and to mother Earth. There is no time to waste. In this context, to buy time becomes a criminal strategy.

Moreover, one must also add that the ecological crisis is not merely an economic, social or political problem. It is fundamentally a deep moral and theological issue. Ethicist James Nash goes beyond the empirical information available regarding the ecological problems. He boldly asks the question: “What do the ecological data suggest about moral problems and responsibilities?”²²⁵ His question is not a “moralistic” approach to seemingly serious scientific research.

²²⁴ Jeffrey Sachs, “The Class System of Catastrophe,” *Time*, January 10, 2005, 86.

²²⁵ James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 24.

Rather, it is an attempt to go beyond the surface and deal with the deep motives and multiple reasons that produce situations such as the ones described above. The challenge of the present generation is not to apply a “band-aid to a cancerous wound.” Rather, the challenge resides in the ability to radically transform both people and the structures of society--both within nations and between nations--that have led the world to where it is now. No middle-of-the-way solutions seem to be useful any longer. Profound changes in the way communal and personal lives are organized are needed as well as a thorough cultural, spiritual, social and economic transformation. Leonardo Boff claims that the ecological crisis is a crisis of the paradigm of civilization, and argues for the emergence of a new paradigm, for “a new way of engaging in dialogue with all beings and their relationships.”²²⁶

Furthermore, as the ecological crisis and devastation is a matter of life and death, it is, therefore, a fundamental biblical and theological problem. It echoes the radical choice, witnessed by heaven and earth: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30: 19).

Scholars have argued that both Christian theology and the Bible share a great responsibility for the careless way the West has dealt with the Earth. Lynn White’s (in)famous article, originally published in 1967, epitomizes the point: “Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen...[it] not only established a dualism of man [sic] and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man [sic] exploit nature

²²⁶ *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 11.

for his [sic] proper ends.”²²⁷ Many other scholars have challenged White’s interpretation of the Bible and his understanding of the role that Christianity played in the ecological crisis.²²⁸

As Christians, together with other concerned people, constructively engage in restoring the creation, some questions are still relevant: Has theology anything to contribute to the needed transformation of people, and of their relationship with other creatures and with the Earth? Has the Bible any significance and relevance in this discussion?

²²⁷ Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science*, vol. 155, no.3767, (10 March 1967): 1203-1207.

²²⁸See *inter alia* Thomas S. Derr, “Religion’s Responsibility for the Ecological Crisis: An Argument Run Amok,” in *Worldview*, vol.18, no.1 (January 1975): 39-45; Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality: The Call to Redeem Life on Earth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984); Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed., *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972); and Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000).

CHAPTER TWO

TOWARD A HERMENEUTICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL ECOLOGY

AND ECO-JUSTICE.

The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.

Karl Marx, *Thesis on Feuerbach*

Be a realist, demand the impossible.

Graffiti written in a wall in Paris, May-June 1968

Then, he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.

Luke 24:46

Recovery of the biblical social horizon together with the pain and terror of our own horizon might even convince us that the struggle for eco-justice is the most authentic and urgent way to be Christian in this moment of history.

Norman K. Gottwald ²²⁹

Introduction: The Bible

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullian (ca.150/160-220/240) uttered his famous sentence, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem... what has the academy to do with the Church?”²³⁰ For him, Athens represented the secular spirit, while Jerusalem, the holy city, was the representative *par excellence* of the religious and spiritual quest. *Mutatis mutandis*, we could also ask: What has the ecological crisis to do with the

²²⁹ “The Biblical Mandate for Eco-Justice Action,” in *For Creation’s Sake: Preaching, Ecology & Justice*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1985), 44.

²³⁰ *Prescription against Heretics*, vii.

Bible? Do we need the Bible at all? Walter Wink once reminded his readers that “anyone who needs scriptural guidance to decide that destroying the ecosystem is wrong is a moral idiot.”²³¹

Moreover, some scholars and activists alike, deeply concerned with issues of social justice and ecological devastation, have consciously decided that there is no reason to go to the Bible for their theological work.²³² Perhaps there are valid historical reasons to defend such a position. For instance, the modern (mainly western) interpretation of texts such as Gen 1:28-30 or Psalm 8:3-8, and the marked anthropocentric and even androcentric understandings of “dominion” that have emerged, are considered real liabilities by scholars and activists for their action and reflection. Sri Lankan post-colonial scholar, R. S. Sugirtharajah, warns readers that the Bible is regarded by postcolonialism as “both a safe and an unsafe text, and as both a familiar and a distant one.”²³³ Moreover, he adds that the Bible can be seen “as both problem and solution,”²³⁴ a judgment that certainly extends to the New Testament representation of the non-human world.

Others have come to think differently. As ecojustice scholar Dietrich Hessel argues, “the motive power for caring deeply about humans and other creatures

²³¹ Walter Wink, “Ecobible: The Bible and Ecojustice,” *Theology Today* vol.49, no.4 (January 1993): 466.

²³² See, for example Tomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1998), and *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999); Carol J. Adams, *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993); Elizabeth Gray, *Green Paradise Lost* (Wellesley, MA: Roundtable Press, 1981), and *Patriarchy as a Conceptual Trap* (Wellesley, MA: Roundtable Press, 1982).

²³³ R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 259.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 260.

is religious in that it expresses ultimate concern.”²³⁵ Therefore, for him as for others, the Bible is seen as a corpus that has the potential to make a critical contribution to the discussion.

The Bible is characterized by a plurality of voices and noticeable theological diversity. Moreover, the reader is not only confronted with different literary styles and genres, but also with the fact that biblical writers, themselves, represent different schools of thought. Consequently, they have different views and positions, depending on their social location, historical periods, and interests. Thus, in the Scriptures, one can find not only ambivalences, ambiguities, and even contradictions, but also ideas that reflect a patriarchal and hierarchical society as well as culture that many people reject with validity today. For centuries, the Bible has been read, re-read and interpreted in different and multi-hued ways

The Bible is an interesting paradox. On the one hand, it is a collection of texts emerging from people who most of the time were the subject of different powerful empires, be they Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia or Rome. It is a people whose social location is on the periphery, rather than at the center of power. Certainly, while this characterization in no way warrants a homogeneous position, it is, indeed, a very important feature that needs to be taken into consideration. Wink underlines this un-privileged position when he argues that

It had to be an enslaved people who formulated, for the first time in human history, a critique of domination: the narrative of the Exodus. It was their experience of oppression that enabled the Hebrews to tell, for

²³⁵ In the Foreword to Peter W. Bekken, Joan Gibb Engel, and J. Ronald Engel, *Ecology, Justice and Christian Faith. A Critical Guide to the Literature*. (Westport: Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1995), xiv.

the first time, a story of reality from the point of view of the victim, not the victors. The Bible is not a repository of politically correct opinions, but an ongoing struggle to overcome domination right in our own tradition, in our own Scripture, in our own homes.²³⁶

In the ancient world, written texts were basically the product of the *élite*, the cultured sector of the people. It is a group which also had its ambiguities, internal contradictions, and specific interests. There are texts that originate from elitist sectors which are allied with the political and religious interests of those in power positions, relative as these may be under political occupation and control. There are other texts, which have their origins in prophetic circles, for instance, which posited a staunch critique of the oppressive political and religious institutions, and have a distinct and different understanding of the needs and the aspirations of the poor for justice and fairness. These texts served as a reminder to those in power that Yahweh is a God who rescued God's people from oppression and slavery, and, above all, is a God of justice.

On the other hand, while the Bible was a product of subjected people, it was later appropriated and used by modern imperial powers as one more instrument that contributed to the domination of the "other," of the colonized subjects and the larger creation. Sugirtharajah, from his perspective, calls it a book that was "turned into a cultural artifact of the English people...distributed around the world as an icon containing civilizing properties."²³⁷ Portugal, Spain, England, and later, the United States of America, are examples of colonial imperial powers that have made use of the

²³⁶ "Ecobible: The Bible and Ecojustice," 476.

²³⁷ R.S. Sugirtharajah, "Biblical Studies after the Empire: From a Colonial to a Postcolonial Mode of Interpretation," in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 15.

Bible--explicitly or implicitly, directly or through its supporters-- to plunder, conquer, dominate and then justify or give “divine sanction” to both.²³⁸

Furthermore, to add paradox upon paradox, the book was re-appropriated again by the subjected people, and was considered by them as an important contribution to its liberation. Reflecting upon the reading of the Bible in the Ecclesial Base Communities in Latin America, Brazilian liberation theologian, Carlos Mesters, claims that, “the Bible was taken out of the peoples’ hands. Now they are taking it back. They are expropriating the expropriators...Now it is the people’s book again...That gives them a new way of seeing, new eyes.”²³⁹ Particularly, but not exclusively in Latin America, the new, critical and popular readings of the Bible has opened avenues to understand its message of liberation. Reading the Bible from the perspective of the poor and the marginalized has helped to produce a renewed awareness of the biblical message of justice, for the people and for God’s creation, and has helped and supported the people in their struggles for liberation.²⁴⁰ They have joined their cries to the words of Mary, Jesus, and the prophets of old, trusting in the One who takes the cause of the poor, who “has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly;... filled the hungry with good things, and

²³⁸ See particularly in relation to the USA, the work of Lebanese scholar Tarek Mitri, *Au nom de la Bible, au nom de l’Amerique* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2004).

²³⁹ Carlos Mesters “The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People,” in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman K. Gottwald (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 128.

²⁴⁰ See Mesters, *ibid.*; Elsa Tamez, *The Bible of The Oppressed* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1982); Paulo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People’s Commentary to the Book of Revelation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995); Alan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), and Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname* (4 vols.) (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976-1982).

sent the rich away empty,” (Lk 1:52-53). This is the God who releases the captives, and lets the oppressed go free (Lk. 4:18). It is from this perspective, the perspective of the poor, “the most threatened of nature’s creation today,”²⁴¹ that re-readings of the Bible are done, and new meanings are found.

A word of caution is appropriate here. It is necessary to be careful and not to embrace the fallacy that conceives the Bible as a handbook of ready-made recipes for solutions to humanity’s problems. The Bible was never meant to be such a thing. Furthermore, and in agreement with Sugirtharajah, one has to be aware of the “danger in liberation hermeneutics making the Bible the ultimate adjudicator in matters related to morals and theological disputes.”²⁴² Nevertheless, as the Bible continues to play a critical role in the life of many people as a particular witness to a God who loves justice (Ps 99:4) and requires justice and mercy (Mic 6:8), it becomes important to discover anew its message for life in all its fullness (John 10:10). This task is urgent, particularly at times where the very existence of life is at stake.²⁴³ Again, Carlos Mesters reminds his readers that the main concern is not to find out what the Bible says in itself, but to learn what it has to say about life. Sugirtharajah, in his critical rendering of liberationist readings, especially those from Latin America, argues that

The purpose of interpretation is not to seek historical information about the biblical record but to deal with the issues that face them [the people]. The emphasis is not on the text’s meaning in itself but rather

²⁴¹ Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 1.

²⁴² *The Bible and the Third World*, 259.

²⁴³ See Ingemar Hedstrom, “Latin America and the Need for a Life-Liberating Theology,” in *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, ed., Charles Birch, William Eakim and Jay McDaniel (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 111-124.

on the meaning the text has for the people who read it... The Bible, then, becomes the fundamental criterion for discerning life.²⁴⁴

Concerning the question of life in all its manifestations and of justice for peoples and the Earth, perhaps the *Earth Bible Project* is one of the best examples for reading the Bible in a time of ecological crisis and rampant injustice. The *Earth Bible Project* is an Australian initiative that from the standpoint of ecojustice, tries to “signal a fresh discussion about how the Bible has played, and may continue to play, a role in the current theological crisis faced by our planet.”²⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the editor is aware of the ambiguities of the enterprise. Norman Habel claims that “the Earth crisis challenges us to read the Bible afresh and ask whether the biblical text itself, its interpreters--or both—have contributed to this crisis.”²⁴⁶ The contributors to the project have developed six ecojustice principles²⁴⁷ which serve as a hermeneutical framework for the reading of the texts, with the purpose, among others, “to develop technique of reading the text to discern and retrieve alternative traditions where the voice of the Earth community has been suppressed.”²⁴⁸

The question which is at stake here is not to randomly cite isolated biblical texts and have them act as “proof texts” to “biblically” support particular positions.

²⁴⁴ *The Bible and the Third World*, 221.

²⁴⁵ Habel, ed., *Reading from the Perspective of Earth*, 9.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁴⁷ They are: The Principle of Intrinsic Worth; the Principle of Interconnectedness; the Principle of Voice; the Principle of Purpose; the Principle of Mutual Custodianship; and the Principle of Resistance. See *Reading from the Perspective of Earth*, 24. Other volumes in the collection are: Norman C. Habel & Shirley Wurst, ed., *The Earth Story in Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Norman C. Habel, ed., *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Norman C. Habel & Shirley Wurst, ed., *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), and Norman C. Habel and Vicky Balabansky, ed., *The Earth Story in the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

²⁴⁸ *Reading from the Perspective of the Earth*, 37.

This would merely be a fundamentalist and apologetic approach. The issue is to discover, as Walter Wink argues, “the tenor” to the Scripture, that is, its core and overriding spirit, and therefore, its implications. He claims that

the gospel is the message of the coming of God’s domination-free order. Jesus’ teaching and being are at the fore of the Scripture, and Jesus is against domination. His preaching of the Reign of God is directed precisely at the overcoming of dominations. A critique of domination is, I believe, the tenor, or central theme, or gist, of the gospel.²⁴⁹

Such an understanding of the gospel implies--for Wink and for other ecojustice theologians--the commitment to the struggle for justice and fairness for all God’s creatures. Therefore, as the ecological devastation and the threats to life are fundamentally theological and ethical questions, the Bible, at least for Jews and Christians, becomes part and parcel of the discussion.²⁵⁰ In this light, again the question needs to be raised: How does this kind of understanding of the Bible and of the particular texts chosen in this study serve to refine and expand the transformative vision of social ecology and ecojustice?

Conversely, and following Tertullian, one could ask: But, what then has *social ecology* to do with the Bible? What has a discipline--whose major exponents are rather “secular” and non-religious and even critical of any religious or spiritual views on any subject--to do with the Bible, the text which bear witness to a God of liberation and justice? It is interesting to note that in reviewing critical methods or different approaches to the biblical texts, no

²⁴⁹ “Ecobible: The Bible and Ecojustice,” 467.

²⁵⁰ For an evangelical approach on the issue of the Bible *vis à vis* the ecological questions, see DeWitt, *Earth Wise: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues*.

scholar includes *social ecology* as a tried hermeneutical framework for reading the texts.²⁵¹

The dearth or simply the near absence of works on Social Ecology and the Bible is remarkable and puzzling. The most complete bibliography to date, prepared by Bakken, Engel and Engel,²⁵² does not even show a single entry on social ecology. This fact, indeed, reveals a significant void in the recent research related to biblical studies in the area. Why is it so? Is it because social ecology does not start from a “religious” standpoint? Or it is considered to be tainted by a particular critical version of Marxism and dialectical naturalism? Whatever the reason, this conspicuous absence in the scholarship on Bible and Ecology needs correction. Thus, in this dissertation, I argue that social ecology has important insights to contribute to the reading of biblical texts, and I raise this point as one of the principal challenge for this research project. Once more, and mirroring the matter, in the critical relationship and tension between text and hermeneutical frameworks, the texts may challenge the lens and, using

²⁵¹ See, for example, Gottwald, Norman K., ed., *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983); Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, ed., *To Each its Own Meaning: Biblical Criticisms and their Application* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999); Susan E. Gillingham, *One Bible, Many Voices: Different Approaches to Biblical Studies* (London: SPCK, 1998), and Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, ed.) *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, Vol.1, and *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, Vol.2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

²⁵² Peter Baken, Joan Gibb Engel, and J. Ronald Engel, *Ecology, Justice and the Christian Faith: A Critical Guide to the Literature*. This text covers important areas of research, such as Historical and Cultural Studies, Theological and Philosophical Perspectives, Ethical Analysis, Economics and Sustainability, and Social and Political Issues, *inter alia*.

the metaphor that biblical scholar Stephen Moore applied to Mark, they may devour the readings that are thrown at them.²⁵³

Murray Bookchin and Social Ecology.

In an overview of the different tendencies in ecological praxis and reflections, Brazilian Leonardo Boff mentions that they tend to compete with each other in their capacity to influence society and create public opinion. In his analysis, he points out the contributions, possibilities and limitations of each tendency, assessing them in the light of the experiences of the Latin American people, particularly of the indigenous peoples. Interestingly enough, when discussing *Social Ecology*, he affirms that in the 1970's, this particular expression "was created by the Uruguayans and then it was incorporated worldwide."²⁵⁴ Is this just a Latin American desire to receive due credit? It is a fact that in Montevideo, the capital city of Uruguay, a *Centro de Investigación y Promoción Franciscano y Ecológico* exists. One of the best-known Latin American social ecologists, Eduardo Gudynas (see below) is a member of this pioneering center.²⁵⁵ However, from that to pretending to have the "intellectual

²⁵³ Stephen D. Moore, *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives: Jesus Begins to Write* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 5.

²⁵⁴ Leonardo Boff, "Las Tendencias de la Ecología," *PASOS* 68 (Noviembre-Diciembre 1996). Full text can be found in [www:dei-cr.org/PASOS.PHP?pasos-actual=68/](http://www.dei-cr.org/PASOS.PHP?pasos-actual=68/) 10 October 2004. Among the *tendencias*, Boff includes: conservationism, environmentalism, human ecology, social ecology, the ecology of the mind, deep/radical ecology, and holistic ecology. My translation

²⁵⁵ Domingo Coelho, one of the representatives of the Center, when writing about its beginnings says "[the center] was born in an undetermined date of a vague year..." He mentions several "triggering moments" for the start of the center, like the 800th Anniversary of the death of St. Francis of Assisi (1981), or the 750th anniversary of his death (1976), or even the year in which St. Francis was proclaimed by Pope John Paul II as the patron saint for Ecology (1979). In any case, the Center

parenthood” of the concept, there lies a big distance. Instead, Antonio Miglianelli, an Argentinian environmentalist, has no problem in recognizing-- as most scholars do today—that Murray Bookchin is to be considered the “father “and initiator of social ecology.”²⁵⁶

Bookchin is an authentic pioneer, an “ecovisionary... one of the most strident voices during the past forty years on the relationship between ethics and ecological issues,” as David Kinsley puts it.²⁵⁷ The radicalism of his proposals can be seen in the following statement: “Our world, it would appear, will either undergo revolutionary changes, so far-reaching in character that humanity will totally transform its social relations and its very conception of life or it will suffer an apocalypse that may well end humanity’s tenure on the planet.”²⁵⁸

Bookchin’s life is an interesting combination of an activist/militant and a scholar. He was born on January 14, 1921, in the city of New York. His parents were Russian Jewish immigrants who were very active in the Russian revolutionary movement. He grew up as a self-described “red-diaper baby.” Very early in life, Bookchin joined the Communist youth movement and was later expelled for his Trotskyist-anarchist “deviations.” He worked as a foundryman, as an autoworker, and

seems to have had a rather nebulous beginning, in which the fathers *Capuchinos* and the *Conventuales* were instrumentals for its organization. See Website of the Ecumenical Centers in Latin America, www.redconosur.org/miembros. 12 December 2004.

²⁵⁶ “De la Ecología a la Ecología Social,” in the Website of the Red Latino Americana y Caribeña de Ecología Social, www.ambiental.net/biblioteca/migianelli/ecologia-social.htm. 12 December 2004.

²⁵⁷ David Kinsley, *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995), 210-11.

²⁵⁸ Murray Bookchin, “The Concept of Social Ecology,” in *Ecology: Key Concepts in Critical Theory*, ed. Carolyn Merchant (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1994), 154.

was heavily involved in trade union activities. In the early fifties (the McCarthy years), he published pamphlets and other writings on political journals against nuclear weapons.²⁵⁹ For obvious reasons, he did so under different pseudonyms.²⁶⁰ Already in 1952, Bookchin was writing concerning the effects of pesticides on food.²⁶¹ It is to be noted that his first book, *Our Synthetic Environment*, was published in 1962, that is, even before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. His thinking has greatly influenced diverse social movements as well as the Green political parties in Europe and elsewhere, and has provided theoretical groundings for their political actions and proposals.²⁶² His philosophical reflections are anchored to the concept of "dialectical naturalism,"²⁶³ and his political thinking became known as "libertarian municipalism," the concrete political dimension of Communalism.²⁶⁴ In his many writings and activities, Bookchin

²⁵⁹ For a chronological bibliography of published books, articles, interviews, letters, etc, by Murray Bookchin from 1950 onwards, including translations, see the Website of Anarchy Archives: http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/bookchin/bookchin_biblio.thml. 23 October 2003. This bibliography was compiled by Janel Biehl, his associate and companion on the occasion of Bookchin's seventieth birthday, January 14, 1991 and subsequently revised and updated.

²⁶⁰ The best known were M.S. Shiloh, Robert Keller, Harry Lud and above all, Lewis Herber.

²⁶¹ Lewis Herber, "The Problem of Chemicals in Food," *Contemporary Issues*, vol.3, no.12 (June-August, 1952).

²⁶² For a historical overview, see the unsigned article, "Social Ecology and Social Movements: From the 1960s to the Present," in the eNewsletter of the Institute for Social Ecology, <http://www.social-ecology.org/article.php?story> 20 February 2004.

²⁶³ It can be briefly described as a philosophy that "identifies natural evolution as a directional (but not deterministic or teleological) progression toward the ever-increasing diversity of life, complexity of consciousness, and freedom of choice." See www.treesong.org/philosophy/#social. 7 March 2005. A more detailed development can be found in Bookchin's book *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1990).

²⁶⁴ In a nutshell it can be defined as "A politics based upon the recovery or creation of direct-democratic popular assemblies on municipal, neighborhood and town levels. Economic life would come under the democratic control of citizens, the municipalization of the economy. The democratized municipalities would confederate in order to manage regional issues and to forms a counter-power to the centralized nation-state." See Website of the Institute for Social Ecology: www.social-ecology.org

worked hard to join together sound ecological thinking and political radicalism, a particular combination that none attempted before him. A strong critic of the capitalist system and its devastating ecological consequences, Bookchin was also a professor at the City University of New York (CUNY) in Staten Island, at the Alternative University of New York, and at Ramapo College, in Mahwah, New Jersey, a public liberal arts college known for its high standards of ecological policies. In 1974 he was one of the founders of the Institute for Social Ecology (ISE), an institute located in Plainfield, Vermont which defines its mission as “the creation of educational experiences that enhance people’s understanding of their relationship to the natural world and each other,” forming students that “can work effectively as participants in the process of ecological reconstruction.”²⁶⁵

Indeed, one can say that Bookchin is to social ecology what Socrates is to *maieutic*, Derrida to *deconstruction* and Paulo Freire to *conscientização*. His works are considered pivotal in introducing the ecological dimension into the political thinking of the progressive political parties. He writes: “In short, the

ecology.org 12 December 2004. Concerning Communalism, Bookchin claims that it “is the overarching political category most suitable to encompass the fully thought out and systematic views of social ecology, including libertarian municipalism and dialectical naturalism.” See his article “The Communalist Project,” in *Harbinger*, Vol.3, No.1, (Spring 2003): 20-34, here 27. The word comes from the Paris Commune of 1871, and Bookchin accepts as a working definition of it that which is given by *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. It is “a theory or system of government in which virtually autonomous local communities are loosely bound in a federation.” For further development of the concept, see below.

²⁶⁵ The ISE is an independent institution of higher education dedicated to the study of social ecology, an interdisciplinary field drawing on philosophy, political and social theory, anthropology, history, economic, the natural sciences and feminism. It sees itself as both an educational and activist institution, committed to the social and ecological transformation of society. The ISE aims to move beyond a “band-aid” approach to environmental problems, aiming at “a revolutionary reconstructive perspective focusing on the process of ecologically-oriented social change.” It has also fostered alternative technologies and ecological means of food production. See www.social-ecology.org 12 December, 2004

Left had been oblivious to ecological issues, which were merely regarded as a ‘petty bourgeois’ endeavor to redirect public attention away from a hazy need to abolish capitalism pure and simple!”²⁶⁶ Conversely, the concept of ecology acquires also a new and broader dimension. He is convinced that “social ecology gave ecology a sharp revolutionary and political edge.”²⁶⁷ One can also say that Bookchin has been to the political theory of movements working for radical changes in society to what Leonardo Boff has been to Liberation Theology: a radical contribution and a new departure, in which ecology becomes a fundamental dimension representing a paradigm change.²⁶⁸ Bookchin died July 30, 2006 in Burlington, Vermont.

The first part of this chapter is centered on the main concepts and notions of social ecology as developed by Murray Bookchin and his followers. In critically engaging Bookchin, because of the limitation of this project, the main focus will be on highlighting the fundamental tenets and insights of the school of thought that he pioneered, known by the name of social ecology. In so doing, I will also include developments of his seminal ideas, as proposed by some of his critics. I would argue that his understanding of the seriousness of the current ecological crisis and of its causes, his views on the issues around exploitation, hierarchy and domination, gender and age oppression, his criticism of the prevailing economic (i.e. globalized capitalist) system, and his political dimension (libertarian municipalism), could provide a

²⁶⁶ Murray Bookchin, “Reflections: An overview of the Roots of Social Ecology,” *Harbinger*, Vol.3, no.1 (Spring 2003): 6.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁶⁸ Note particularly Leonardo Boff’s *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995); *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997); and *La voz del arco iris* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2003).

hermeneutical framework that is relevant and pertinent for an ecologically sound and justice-centered reading of biblical texts.

It goes without saying that Bookchin is a controversial writer. He is well-known for his strong criticism of orthodox Marxist ideology using conventional Marxist language. Most of the time, Bookchin was at odds with other peers and critics, who at times have accused him of sectarianism and intolerance. However, social ecology is larger than one person, even one as important as Murray Bookchin. Andrew Light, a professor of Philosophy and Environmental Studies, and editor of a critical volume concerning the challenges *from* and *to* social ecology, recognizes the important role that Bookchin played as the person who “has pressed us all to move forward and continue the conversation over his ideas...whether we align ourselves in his camp or not. Surely, no author could ask for a greater tribute.”²⁶⁹ To underline Bookchin’s critical contribution, Light’s introductory article is entitled “Bookchin as/and Social Ecology.”²⁷⁰ Brian Tokar, a faculty member of the Institute of Social Ecology, argues that

Numerous concepts that became common wisdom among ecological and left libertarian activists in the sixties and beyond were first articulated clearly in Bookchin’s writings including the socially reconstructive dimension of ecological science, the potential links between sustainable technologies and political decentralization, and the evolution of class consciousness toward a broader critique of social hierarchy.²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ Andrew Light, ed., *Social Ecology after Bookchin* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1998), xi.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 1-23.

²⁷¹ Brian Tokar, “On Bookchin’s Social Ecology and its Contributions to Social Movements,” *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, Vol 19, number 1(March 2008): 51.

Scholars have remarked that there are elements in Bookchin's thought that deserve to be deeply scrutinized and criticized, and some of them even developed and surpassed.²⁷² In discussing Bookchin's views and perspectives, I will be guided by the position that Paul Ricoeur once embraced: "*une voie qui se serait ni celle du fanatisme de la pureté ni celle du compromis éclectique a tout prix.*"²⁷³

A closer look at Social Ecology.

Encyclopedias, in their attempt to encapsulate complicated systems or ideas in few lines, sometimes fail to do justice to what they try to describe. Moreover, there are cases in which important concepts are almost ignored or simply skipped over. In *Conservation and Environmentalism: An Encyclopedia*,²⁷⁴ for example, in searching for "Social Ecology", the reader is directed to the entry, "radical environmentalism" or "ecoanarchism." While in the former, social ecology is lumped together with deep ecology, ecofeminism, eco-marxism, and eco-socialism;²⁷⁵ for the latter, it is reduced to an almost insignificant footnote.²⁷⁶ The *Encyclopedia of Environmental Issues* and *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* are, perhaps, exceptions. The former

²⁷² See *inter alia* the contributions to the volume edited by Andrew Light mentioned above, as well as Robin Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992); Takis Fotopoulos, "Social Ecology, Eco-Communitarianism and Inclusive Democracy," in www.democracynature.org/dn/vol5/fotopoulos_inclusive.htm 12 November 2003; Guy diZerega, "Social Ecology, Deep Ecology and Liberalism," in <http://dizerega.com/socecol.Pdf>, 30 March 2005; Philip Winn, "Social Ecology: Some Concern," in www.spunk.org/texts/pubs/theananc/1/sp00740/txt, 10 March 2005, and Ariel Salleh, "Social Ecology and 'The Man Question,'" in <http://www.cat.org.au/vof/versions/salleh.htm>, 12 March 2005.

²⁷³ Paul Ricoeur, "Du conflit à la convergence des méthodes en exégèse Biblique," in *Exégèse et Herméneutique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971), 35.

²⁷⁴ Ed. Robert Paehlke (New York and London: Garland Publishing Co. 1995).

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 539-540.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 193-194.

describes social ecology as “both a philosophy and organizing principles for social reformers who are concerned about the environment. It aims to achieve an ecosystem in which humans and the rest of the natural world live in harmony in a nonexploitative setting... and provides trenchant criticism of modern society.”²⁷⁷ In the latter, John Clark, of Loyola University New Orleans, mainly focus his analysis on the relationship between social ecology--with its anti-spiritual and anti-religious position as developed by Bookchin and Janet Biehl--and other expressions of the theory that are more open to its connection with spirituality.²⁷⁸ The *Environmental Encyclopedia*, for example, argues that social ecology is defined in a variety of ways by different individuals and that, in general, the term remains ambiguous.²⁷⁹ A similar publication briefly notes that “the term *social ecology* is widely and ambiguously used...”²⁸⁰ Others argue that social ecology is “less diverse than other ecological movements, but that gives it certain strengths in coherence.”²⁸¹ Be that as it may, in focusing on the way Murray Bookchin particularly developed this philosophical and political theory, specific limits to a potential equivocal concept need to be delineated.

Writing under a pseudonym, Bookchin used the expression *social ecology* for the first time in a widely circulated article in 1964.²⁸² He underlined there that it is

²⁷⁷ *Encyclopedia of Environmental Issues* (Pasadena, California , Salem Press, Inc., 2000) s.v. “social ecology”, by John M. Theilmann, 682.

²⁷⁸ *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, 2005 edition, s.v. Social Ecology.

²⁷⁹ *Environmental Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed., s.v. “Social Ecology,” by Gerald E. Young, 1308.

²⁸⁰ Ruth A. Eblen and William R.Eblen, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Environment* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1994), 654.

²⁸¹ “Social Ecology Critique” in <http://www.thegreenfuse.org/se-crit.htm> 12 November 2003.

²⁸² Lewis Herber, “Ecology and Revolutionary Thought,” in *New Directions in Libertarian Thought* (September 1964). Distributed as a leaflet by Green Program

necessary to use this expression since “nearly all ecological problems are social problems.”²⁸³ Social ecology has also been described as “ecological humanism,” and its origins can be traced to the mutualistic and communitarian ideas of the Russian anarchist, Piotr Kropotkin (1842-1921), the French geographer Elisée Reclus (1830-1905), the Scottish botanist and social thinker Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), and USA historian and social theorist, Lewis Mumford (1895-1992).²⁸⁴ Of all Bookchin’s works, perhaps the best presentation of his concept of social ecology is found in his *magnum opus*, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*.²⁸⁵ In his view, social ecology is not only a powerful discipline from which to draw a critique of the present social (dis)order, but “[it] provides more than a critique of the split between humanity and nature; it also poses the need to heal them. Indeed it poses the need to transcend them.”²⁸⁶ The goal of social ecology from Bookchin’s perspective is *wholeness*. However, and in order to avoid unnecessary and totalitarian misunderstandings, Bookchin carefully qualifies it. For him, wholeness has to be seen in terms of mutual interdependence. It is not “a spectral ‘oneness’ that yields

Project Burlington, Vermont in 1988. Spanish translation: “Por una Sociedad Ecológica,” *Antipode*, vol.10 and 11 (1979): 21-32.

²⁸³ Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society* (Montreal: Black Rose Press, 1989), 24.

²⁸⁴ See John Clark’s article “A Social Ecology” in <http://librarynothingness.org> 23 March 2005. Clark, one of Bookchin critics, develops further the concept of social ecology. In this article, Clark describes social ecology as follows: “In its deepest and most authentic sense, a social ecology is the awakening earth community reflecting on itself, uncovering its history, exploring its present predicament, and contemplating its future.”

²⁸⁵ Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto, California: Cheshire Books, 1982).

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

cosmic dissolution in a structureless nirvana; it is a richly articulated structure with a history and internal logics of its own.”²⁸⁷ Furthermore, he adds that

ecological wholeness is not an immutable homogeneity but rather the very opposite – a dynamic *unity of diversity*... ecological stability ... is a function not of simplicity and homogeneity but of complexity and variety. The capacity of an ecosystem to retain its integrity depends not on the uniformity of the environment but on its diversity.²⁸⁸

On this particular issue it is important to remind the warning of Antonia Gorman. She claims that “[Romanticism’s] vision of ‘wholeness’ must not be appropriated uncritically. The totalizing tendencies of the wholeness metaphor have too much parallels with atonement logic, implicitly and often explicitly accepting the moral legitimacy of sacrificing the vulnerable and innocent for the good of the elect...”²⁸⁹

To confront the seriousness of the ecological and social crisis, Bookchin challenges his readers and followers to dare to “think outside the box.” He argues that “we can no longer afford to be unimaginative; we can no longer afford to do without utopian thinking. The crisis is too serious and the possibilities too sweeping to be resolved by customary modes of thought.” Therefore, he solemnly adds, “if we don’t do the impossible, we shall be faced with the unthinkable.”²⁹⁰ Here the social philosopher rejoins the activist. Social ecology becomes important, in Bookchin words, as “it offers no case whatsoever for hierarchy in nature and society; it decisively challenges the

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 23.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 24.

²⁸⁹ Antonia Gorman, “Surrogate Suffering: Paradigms of Sin, Salvation, and Sacrifice Within the Vivisection Movement,” in *ECOSPIRIT: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 388.

²⁹⁰ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*. 41.

very function of hierarchy ...in *both* realms. The association or order as such with hierarchy is ruptured. And this association is ruptured without rupturing the association of nature and society...”²⁹¹ Furthermore, Bookchin goes beyond mere analysis, to suggest concrete political and ethical action. He argues elsewhere that “Social ecology, a coherent vision of social development that intertwines the mutual impact of hierarchy *and* class on the civilizing of humanity, has for decades argued that we must reorder social relations so that humanity can live in a protective balance with the natural world.”²⁹² He also claims that it is a rather new discipline that is able to integrate “critique with reconstruction, theory with practice, vision with technique.”²⁹³ Fundamentally, the reordering of social relations as articulated in social ecology, aims at the elimination of hierarchy and domination at all levels.

Hierarchy, domination, and the ecological crisis

The ideas of hierarchy and domination constitute a critical component in the thinking of Bookchin. He is critical of those whom he calls “environmentalists,” who, in his opinion, mistakenly focus on the symptoms and not on the root causes of the environmental crisis. That is, the environmental crisis is a result of particular social relations, of the hierarchical structures of society. Therefore, the understanding of hierarchy and domination becomes a key element in the development of the thinking of social ecologists. For Bookchin, hierarchy is closely linked with age (gerontocracy), gender (patriarchy) and class status. In 1964, in his essay “Ecology and Revolutionary Thought”, Bookchin launched one of his basic proposals. He

²⁹¹ Ibid., 37.

²⁹² “The Communalist Project” *Harbinger*, Vol.3, No.1(Spring 2003): 27.

²⁹³ “The Concept of Social Ecology,” 153.

emphasized that “the *idea* of dominating nature has its origins in the very *real* domination of human by humans—that is, in hierarchy... [which] had to be abolished by *institutional* changes that were no less profound and far reaching than those needed to abolish classes.”²⁹⁴ Elsewhere he repeats the main tenet: “The domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of humans by humans.”²⁹⁵ Note here that Bookchin uses *man* not casually or generically, but on purpose. On this score, Rosemary Radford Ruether seems to agree with Bookchin when she quotes Françoise d’Eaubonne, who coined in 1972 the word ecofeminism, “arguing that the destruction of the planet is due to the profit motive inherent in male power.”²⁹⁶

Furthermore, and in an attempt to show the wider dimensions in which hierarchy find its expressions, Bookchin includes the cultural, traditional and psychological spheres. By hierarchy, he understands “the cultural, traditional and psychological systems of obedience and command, not merely the economic and political systems to which the terms class and State, most appropriately refer. Accordingly, hierarchy and domination could easily continue to exist in a ‘classless’ or ‘stateless’ society.”²⁹⁷

One must keep in mind that this domination does not occur in a vacuum. Over the course of history, human beings have been organized into specific economic, social and political institutions. Social ecologists claim that domination according to age, followed by gender, ethnicity and race, and economic classes “preceded and gave rise to the idea of dominating the

²⁹⁴ “Reflections: An Overview of Social Ecology,” 7.

²⁹⁵ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 1.

²⁹⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminist Philosophy, Theology and Ethics,” in *ECOSPIRIT*, 77.

²⁹⁷ *The Ecology of Freedom*, 4.

biosphere.”²⁹⁸ According to Bookchin, the concept of domination emerged in a gradual way. In his historical overview, he admits that the notion of domination “is by no means a universal feature of human culture.”²⁹⁹ He argues that it is absent in the so-called primitive or preliterate communities, which he calls “organic societies.” Among them, and supported by research done by Dorothy Lee,³⁰⁰ Bookchin cites as examples, the history and experiences of the Wintu Indians in California,³⁰¹ the Ihalmiut in Northern Canada, and the Hopi.³⁰² These societies did not foster domination “because of their intense solidarity internally and with the natural world.”³⁰³ Under the heading, “The Emergency of Hierarchy,” Bookchin labors to show how, historically, roles based on sex, age and ancestral lineage developed from organic societies onwards. Eventually, inequalities and hierarchy developed in a pervasive pattern, with the consequences about which we know. He argues that

The breakdown of primordial equality into hierarchical systems of inequality, the disintegration of early kinship groups into social classes, the dissolution of tribal communities into the city, and finally the usurpation of social administration by the State – all profoundly altered not only social life but also the attitude of people toward each other, humanity’s vision of itself, and ultimately its attitude toward the natural world.³⁰⁴

²⁹⁸ Janet Biehl, “Overview of Social Ecology” in <http://together.net/~jbiehl/overview.htm> 12 November 2003.

²⁹⁹ *The Ecology of Freedom*, 43.

³⁰⁰ Particularly her study *Freedom and Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1959).

³⁰¹ For more information see the website of the Four Directions Institute: www.fourdir.com 1 April 2005.

³⁰² For further details see The Hopi Tribe in www.hopi.nsn.us 1 April 2005.

³⁰³ *The Ecology of Freedom*, 44.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

Bookchin also refers to the Hebrew Bible patriarchal texts, pointing to the fact that to the patriarch of old, wives and children “were his chattels, like the animals that made up his herds.”³⁰⁵ Similarly, ancient Greek society is not spared. Bookchin argues that “the earliest victim of this domineering relationship was *human* nature, notably, the human nature of women.”³⁰⁶ The result is clear: patriarchy and authoritarianism. Furthermore, he argues that in a patriarchal and authoritarian society, there is a close relationship in the way men understand and relate to nature and to women. He states that “in a civilization that devalues nature, she is the ‘image of nature,’ the ‘weaker and smaller’...”³⁰⁷ And as nature, women also become “the other.” Bookchin intertwines three closely related concepts here, in a kind of triad of domination: the domination of women by men (sexism); the domination of men by men (classism), and the domination of nature by men/ humans (specieism). He claims that:

Even before man embarks on his conquest of man--of class by class—patriarchal morality obliges him to affirm his conquest of woman. The subjugation of her nature and its absorption into the nexus of patriarchal morality forms the archetypal act of domination that ultimately gives rise to man’s imagery of a subjugated nature.³⁰⁸

The capitalist society (for Bookchin, liberal or state capitalism does not make a fundamental difference), epitomizes the historical process of the development of hierarchy and domination. Elsewhere, he recognizes that capitalism “is unquestionably the most dynamic society ever to appear in history... a highly *mutable* system, continually advancing the brutal maxim that whatever

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 119. Note that Riane Eisler in her historical analysis in *The Chalice and the Blade* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), particularly pages 93-100, draws the same conclusions as Bookchin’s.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 120.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 121.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 121.

enterprise does not grow at the expense of its rivals, must die.”³⁰⁹ A close associate of Bookchin argues that

The present market society is structured around the brutally competitive imperative of “grow or die,” in which enterprises are driven by the pressures of the marketplace to seek profit for capital expansion at the expense of all other considerations; otherwise they will be vanquished by their equally driven competitors. This imperative stands radically at odds with the capacity of the planet to sustain complex forms of life. It must necessarily lead capitalist societies to plunder the planet, to turn back the evolutionary clock to a time when only simpler organisms could exist.³¹⁰

Bookchin is keenly aware of the profound changes which have occurred in modern society, and of the deep transformations of the social conditions produced by late capitalism itself. He asserts that they stand “very much at odds with the simplistic class prognoses advanced by Marx and by the Revolutionary French *syndicalists*.”³¹¹ Moreover, “class categories are now intermingled with hierarchical categories based on race, gender, sexual preference, and certainly national or regional differences.”³¹² Diversities and additional complexities are part of the texture of the issue of domination and exploitation. To sum up, it is the capitalist system that has shown the capacity to commodify and reify everything, including people and humans relations, and, overwhelmingly, nature. And this is, according to Bookchin, the greatest contradiction of the system. He argues that “capitalism has produced a new, perhaps paramount contradiction: the clash between an economy based on unending growth and the desiccation of the natural environment.”³¹³ The Uruguayan social scientist, Julio de Santa Ana, in a staunch critique of the current economic system, adds a

³⁰⁹ “The Communalist Project,” 22.

³¹⁰ Janet Biehl, in <http://together.net/~jbiehl/overview.htm> 12 November 2003.

³¹¹ “The Communalist Project,” 23.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 23.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

qualification. He argues that “the root of the problem is not growth as such, but the type of growth and the means by which it is achieved and its effects.”³¹⁴ In his analysis, the poor, the marginalized, and the excluded bear the brunt of the unjust system. In a nutshell, what monotheism, and, particularly Christianity was to Lynn White Jr.,³¹⁵ capitalism is to Bookchin and other social ecologists. Instead, for US ethicist, Paul Santmire, it is the mindset produced by “modern secularism” that is perceived as the main cause of the ecological devastation.³¹⁶

Humans and Nature.

Bookchin’s critics have claimed that his ideas are basically anthropocentric, although he rejects the either/or thinking that may lie behind the binary anthropocentrism /biocentrism. Social ecologists have stated that “a dialectical analysis rejects all ‘centrisms,’”³¹⁷ and claim that humans and nature are basically connected in a single evolutionary flow. Nevertheless, they highlight humanity’s unique place in the story of evolution, as the most differentiated and the highest form of self-consciousness as well as the only possible source of ethical and moral discourse. They adhere to the idea that “humanity is nature achieving self-consciousness,”³¹⁸ and underline that this is far from

³¹⁴ Julio de Santa Ana, “The Present Socio-Economic System as a Cause of Ecological Imbalance and Poverty,” in *Ecology and Poverty: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo (London/ Maryknoll, New York: SCM Press, 1995), 7.

³¹⁵ Or perhaps, as White later recognized, to *Christians* who misappropriated their religious traditions. See “Conclusions” in previous chapter.

³¹⁶ H. Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 12.

³¹⁷ See John Clark, “A Social Ecology,” in <http://library.nothingness.org>. 12 March, 2005.

³¹⁸ Elisée Reclus, *L’Homme et la Terre*, 6 Vol. (Paris: Librairie Universelle, 1905-08). Vol. I, i.

being hierarchical, dualistic or anthropocentric. After all, Bookchin argues, it is only the human species that can formulate the concept of “intrinsic worth” of all life forms. And this is the result of

humanity’s intellectual, moral and aesthetic qualities – qualities that no other life-forms possess. The “intrinsic worth” of human beings is thus patently exceptional, indeed extraordinary. It is only human beings that can even *formulate* the concept of “intrinsic worth” and endow it with a sense of moral responsibility that no other life-form is capable of doing.³¹⁹

This is so, in Bookchin’s thought, because “one of nature’s very unique species, *homo sapiens*, has slowly and painstakingly developed from the natural world into a unique social world of its own. As both worlds interact with each other through highly complex phases of evolution, it has become as important to speak of a social ecology as it is to speak of a natural ecology.”³²⁰

To the critics that have argued that social ecology is fundamentally anthropocentric, Bookchin responded that this kind of critique is basically an expression of misanthropic ecologism. When discussing this issue, Bookchin is adamant. He strongly criticizes the position that claims that the human species in general is inherently incapable of living in harmony with the ecosystem. David Kinsley recalls a story told by Bookchin, himself, regarding an exhibit on the environment at the New York Museum of Natural History in the seventies. Kinsley says

After showing different kinds of pollution, the last exhibit was entitled “The Most Dangerous Animal on Earth,” and consisted simply of a mirror. Bookchin remembers a school teacher trying to explain the meaning of this particular feature of the exhibit to a black child who

³¹⁹ Murray Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism* (Montreal/ New York: Black Rose Books, 1990), 45.

³²⁰ *The Ecology of Freedom*, 22.

was standing in front of the mirror. It is irritant and irresponsible, Bookchin says, to blame that black child for the earth's pollution. The exhibit message, namely, that the entire human species is the principal threat to the environment and not rapacious individuals who control large corporations and governments, is misleading and absolves guilty individuals by blaming the species as a whole.³²¹

Governments, corporations, and individuals are part and parcel of a system that proclaims unlimited growth and unending search for profit--for the few and privileged—regardless of the cost for both peoples and the environment. Yes, there are people still traveling in different classes on this ship called Earth.

Elsewhere, Bookchin adamantly argues: “How long one can continue to belabor ‘Humanity’ for its affronts to the biosphere without distinguishing between rich and poor, men and women, whites and peoples of colors, exploiters and exploited, is a nagging problem that many ecological philosophers have yet to resolve, or perhaps even recognize.”³²² Bookchin continues his arguments and adds that “The social can no longer be separated from the ecological any more than humanity can be separated from nature.”³²³ He conceives that humanity and society “have a distinctive--albeit by no

³²¹ David Kinsley, *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1995), 212.

³²² *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 160. It is interesting to note here is that there is a certain parallelism with theologian Thomas Sieger Derr, in the fact that both of them were accused of being basically “anthropocentric” thinkers. See Thomas S. Derr, *Ecology and Human Need* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), and *Environmental Ethics and Christian Humanism. With Critical Responses by James A. Nash and Richard J. Neuhaus* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996). While rejecting easy typologies, Derr argues that his ideas should be understood as an expression of Christian humanism. Not without a bit of humor, Derr comments that perhaps his later book is to be included under the category of “unreconstructed anthropocentrism,” *ibid.*, 17.

³²³ *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 47.

means hierarchical--place in natural evolution...[and that is why] our basic ecological problems stem from social problems.”³²⁴

The Ecological Society

Social ecology endeavors to overcome the existing structures of hierarchy and domination of class and gender, and proposes an ecological society. This new ecological society has several hallmarks: it is an egalitarian society, and it is based on mutual aid, caring and communitarian values. To explain its meaning, sometimes Bookchin uses the expression, “a more rational and humane society.” Interestingly, Bookchin engages a historical approach and studies how different societies have dealt with different issues. This kind of analysis provides the basis for a reconstructive approach to an ecological society. He claims that “the history of civilization has been a steady process of estrangement from nature that has increasingly developed into outright antagonism,”³²⁵ and that human beings have conceived that social development “can occur only at the expense of natural development.”³²⁶

Bookchin’s understanding of the ecological society is very particular and indeed hopeful. In an ecological society, he argues,

hierarchy, in effect, will be replaced by interdependence, and consociation would imply the existence of an organic core that meets the deeply felt biological needs for care, cooperation, security, and love. Freedom would no longer be placed in opposition to nature, individuality to society, choice to necessity, or personality to the needs of social coherence.³²⁷

³²⁴ Ibid., 47.

³²⁵ *The Ecology of Freedom*, 315.

³²⁶ Ibid., 316.

³²⁷ Ibid., 318.

For such a society to appear, changes are to be radical and all-encompassing. To use evangelical language, a true and radical conversion (*metanoia*) is to take place. Bookchin claims that people “must try to create a new culture, not merely another movement that attempts to remove the symptoms of our crises without affecting their sources. We must also try to extirpate the hierarchical orientation of our psyches, not merely the institutions that embody social domination.”³²⁸

Concerning gender hierarchy and domination, Bookchin reminds his readers that it was the French socialist utopian thinker, Charles Fourier (1772-1827), who established an important criterion by which to evaluate sound and healthy societies. He was the person “who penned the famous maxim that social progress can be judged by the way a society treats its women.”³²⁹ As far as the relationship between human and nature, he claims that “the concept of an ecological society must begin from a sense of assurance that society and nature are not inherently antithetical.”³³⁰

Earlier, Bookchin invited his readers and disciples to dare to be innovative, to try to dream utopias, to think the impossible, in his own words, to try “to turn the world upside down.”³³¹ Now, he attempts to describe how an ecological society can work. And this is no less than a full program to implement changes and reconstruct the social and political body. *Inter alia*, he argues that

the rudiments of an ecological society will probably be structured around the commune – freely created, human in scale and intimate in its consciously cultivated relationships...decentralized and scaled to human dimensions... recycling its organic wastes... integrate solar,

³²⁸ Ibid., 340.

³²⁹ Ibid., 330.

³³⁰ Ibid., 342.

³³¹ Ibid., 348.

wind, hydraulic, and methane producing installation into a highly variegated pattern for productive power... [it will put an] overwhelming emphasis on quality and permanence. Vehicles, clothing, furnishings, and utensils would often become heirlooms to be handed down from generation to generation rather than discard able items that are quickly sacrificed to the gods of obsolescence. The past would always live in the present as the treasured arts and works of generations gone by.³³²

In a further challenge to those who are ready to commit themselves to the building of such an ecological society, Bookchin points to a way “from here to there,” while at the same time tries to avoid easy, ready-made recipes. Almost in a reassuring way, and inviting his readers to learn from tried strategies and even from historical failures, Bookchin concludes that “the means for tearing down the old are available, both as hope and as peril. So, too, are the means for rebuilding. The ruins themselves are mines for recycling the wastes of an immensely perishable world into the structural materials of one that is free as well as new.”³³³

Communalism and Libertarian Municipalism

As stated above, libertarian municipalism is the political philosophy of social ecology or the concrete political dimension of Communalism, as defined by Bookchin.³³⁴ It is fundamentally a new approach to social life, one which is based on humanly-scaled, decentralized, and basically democratic communities, inspired in the exercise of direct democracy. The organization of the municipality can play a fundamental role and provide a basic framework for the active and committed participation of mature citizens. Bookchin pictures the municipality as

³³² Ibid., 344.

³³³ Ibid., 347.

³³⁴ For an extensive discussion on the matter, see Janet Biehl and Murray Bookchin, *The Politics of Social Ecology: Libertarian Municipalism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1997).

the domain where a mere *animalistic* adaptation to an existing and pregiven environment can be radically supplanted by *proactive, rational* intervention into the world--indeed, a world yet to be made and molded by reason--with a view toward ending the environmental, social and political insults to which humanity and the biosphere have been subjected by classes and hierarchies. Freed of domination as well as material exploitation--indeed, recreated as a rational arena for human creativity in all spheres of life--the municipality becomes the *ethical* space for the good life.³³⁵

Furthermore, the municipality is also described as “popular democratic assemblies based on neighborhoods, town and villages.”³³⁶ The *local* assumes here fundamental importance, always interrelated to and in the framework of the *global* reality. A particular democratized municipality, that is, the locus of the practice of participation and decision-making, in turn, joins together with other similar bodies to deal with issues that go beyond the limits of a given place. In the opinion of its promoters, this type of social and political organization, “can potentially create an institutional counterpower to the nation-state and capitalism, and thereby lead to the creation of an ecological society.”³³⁷

Responding to some of his critics, Bookchin distinguishes communalism from anarchism. The former is not just a mere variant of the latter. Communalism, therefore confronts, challenges, and engages the question of political power. As a radical political thought and praxis, Communalism goes beyond the political dimension defined *strictu sensu*. It also deals with other areas, as education and economics and their implications in the lives of the people and in their emotions and feelings. Furthermore, transparency also constitutes a

³³⁵ “The Communalist Project”, 28.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

³³⁷ Janet Biehl, “Overview of Social Ecology,” in <http://togetgher.net/~jbiehl/overview.htm> 11 November 2003.

hallmark of the organization. Bookchin's description of Communalism sets the standard very high and challenges social, political, and economic mediocrity. He claims, for example, that

In a Communalist way of life, conventional economics, with its focus on prices and scarce resources, would be replaced by *ethics*, with its concern for human needs and the good life. Human solidarity--or *philia*, as the Greeks called it--would replace material gain and egotism. Municipal assemblies would become not only vital arenas for civic life and decision-making but centers where the shadowy world of economic logistics, properly coordinated production, and civic operations would be demystified and opened to the scrutiny and participation of the citizenry as a whole.³³⁸

Libertarian municipalism is a political way of organizing society that is nurtured by a strong suspicion of the consequences of the centralization of power. Centralized political and social power had proven to have devastating results and also developed the capacity to stifle people's creativity and libertarian initiatives.³³⁹ On this issue, ecosjustice meets social ecology. Rosemary Radford Ruether clearly echoes social ecologists when she argues that

It is widely assumed that there is a need to refound local community, in democratic face-to-face relations with the variety of people --across genders, classes, and ethnic groups--living in a given community. There is a need for renewed regional communities to redevelop their relation to the land, agriculture, and water such that they might be utilized in a sustainable way; such changes will need to be based on democratic decision making that takes all parties, including nonhuman nature, into consideration. This also means withdrawing from the centralized systems of control that have been forged by colonialism and neocolonialism. By banding together in communities of accountability, it is hoped that this *system of domination* can be undermined and changed to new ways of networking local communities across regions and across the globe.³⁴⁰

³³⁸ "The Communalist Project," 29.

³³⁹ It is interesting to note that this element of political decision-making in small communes has been taken in the novel by Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), 27, 67, *et passim*.

³⁴⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminist Philosophy, Theology, and Ethics: A Comparative View," in *ECOSPIRIT*, 92. Emphasis mine.

Although one question --and not a minor one—is to be noted: the ecojustice/ecofeminist theologian refrains from explicitly naming the system of domination.

Bookchin's school of social ecology has produced disciples in many areas of the world. Particularly in Latin America, an interesting contextualized reflection was pioneered by the *Centro de Investigación y Promoción Franciscano y Ecológico (CIPFE)*, based in Montevideo, Uruguay.

A Latin American Vision of Social Ecology: *La Praxis por la Vida*

Earlier, I described Bookchin as a controversial scholar. At times, during the fervor of the discussions with his critics, Bookchin has the tendency to dismiss potential allies whom he believes do not think exactly as he does. At times, he seems disinterested in working alliances that have the possibility for furthering progressive causes. He is deeply at odds with those he labels as “environmentalists” and “deep ecologists”³⁴¹ However, in particular situations, where the social, political and economical structures are so devastating and destructive that cause the death of thousands of people and destroy merciless the environment, social theorists, politicians, organizers and activists do not always have the luxury of promoting divisions or sectarian positions. On the contrary, in such situations, it is

³⁴¹ John Clark, one of his followers/critics, describes Bookchin's attitude in a more staunch way. He recognizes that “Bookchin develops and expands the tradition of social ecology in important ways.” However, he adds that “at the same time also narrowed it through dogmatic and non-dialectical attempts at philosophical system-building, through an increasingly sectarian politics, and through intemperate and divisive attacks on ‘competing’ ecophilosophies and on diverse expressions of his own tradition.” See “A Social Ecology,” in <http://library.nothingness.org>.25 April 2004.

necessary to unite all possible social progressive forces to face the powers that produce havoc and devastation. There is no time to lose in minutia, as the clock is ticking. It is in this spirit of urgency, that synergy and cooperation become essential. And this is precisely what one finds in the contribution of the Latin American social ecologists. Among them, the Uruguayan scholar Eduardo Gudynas is a prominent figure. One could even imagine that while Bookchin would be inclined to enlist himself with Jesus' saying, "Whoever is not with me is against me" (Mt 12:30), Gudynas, in turn, would be tilting towards the Markan version, "Whoever is not against us is for us." (Mk 9:40).

Latin American social ecologists, such as Gudynas and Elvia, understand the polemics between Bookchin and representatives of deep ecology as a "domestic discussion" within the northern hemisphere, where entrenched positions do not give way to more comprehensive and integrated ones. The "either/or" seems to prevail over against the "both/and". Conversely, they argue that in Latin America the situation is different. They believe that there seems to be a "possible fruitful synthesis between the two tendencies."³⁴² Furthermore, and in the spirit of gathering together all possible progressive protagonists in this struggle for life, they argue that in Latin America, "social ecology also recognizes the contribution of people movements: conservationists, environmentalists, indigenous peoples, etc... It is true that these movements have a heterogeneous character, but all of them share a basic social and environmental concern."³⁴³ Latin American social ecologists are *rassembleurs*. Faced with exploitative structures and conditions that bring early death, in principle, no one is to be left behind in this struggle for the preservation and the improvement of life.

³⁴² Eduardo Gudynas and G. Elvia, *La Praxis por la Vida: Introducción a las Metodologías de la Ecología Social* (Montevideo: CIPFE, CLAES, NORMAN, 1991), 23. All quotations from this book are my own translation.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 41.

Eduardo Gudynas started his work and reflections on a team based in Montevideo, the capital city of Uruguay. He is professor at the *Universidad de la República* in Montevideo; at the *Multiversidad Franciscana de América Latina* (MFAL; and associate professor of ecology at the College of the Atlantic in the USA. He is also the director of the *Centro Latinoamericano de Ecología Social*.³⁴⁴ He was born in 1960 in Montevideo and is a prolific writer and a recognized researcher. Gudynas, whose training is in animal ecology, was the Coordinator of the First Latin American Congress of Ecology in 1989. Confronted with the situation of the massive deterioration of life, and of the acute poverty and exclusion both in his own country in the continent as a whole, Gudynas argues that “poverty and environmental problems are closely linked.”³⁴⁵ Moreover, he is convinced that the eradication of poverty is, indeed, the best environmental policy. He claims that “it is impossible to solve our present environmental problems without solving the problem of poverty and exclusion.”³⁴⁶ Nothing less than the lives of millions of people is at stake. Therefore, the struggle for life is critical at this juncture. Gudynas challenges

³⁴⁴ From among his books, articles and speeches, I would like to highlight here those more closely related with our interests: “Back to the roots: A Social Ecology analysis of environment, development paradigms and grass root practices,” *International Fund Agricultural Development*, Rome (1988); “La perspectiva ecológica de la Ecología Social,” *Comunidad*, Stockholm (1988); “Ensayo de Conceptualización de la Ecología Social: Una Visión Latinoamericana,” *Cuadernos Latinoamericanos de Ecología Social* (1988); vol. 1: 3-17; “El Concepto de Ambiente en la Práctica de la Ecología Social,” *Estudios en Ecología Social*, (1989) vol.1:1-31; “Ética, Ambiente y Desarrollo en América Latina,” *Apuntes de Ecología* (1989) CIPFE, No. 8 ; “Problemas ambientales globales: Visión Latinoamericana,” *Peregrinos* 3, 1990; and with G. Evia, “Ambiente, práctica ecológica y participación,” *Medio Ambiente*, Lima (1990) and “El movimiento ambientalista desde la Ecología Social: un análisis preliminar,” *Resúmenes*, 4. *Encuentro Latinoamericano. Sistema Humano Ambientales* (1990).

³⁴⁵ Eduardo Gudynas, “Ecology from the Viewpoint of the Poor,” in *Ecology and Poverty: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 110.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

theologians and other Christian scholars alike to develop a relevant ethical, political, and theological discourse that responds to the claims and cries of the excluded majority and of the earth. He is convinced that social ecology and theology are both needed. Each provides a specific contribution to the praxis for life. In the best tradition of Latin American liberation theology, he argues that “true theology, born from an encounter with God, must be a commitment to life.”³⁴⁷ Conversely, the most important contribution of social ecology to theology is that it [social ecology] “would enable us to discover the mystery and magnificence of being part of nature, part of life.”³⁴⁸

In the Prologue to *La Praxis por la Vida*, the Spaniard, José Ramos Regidor, argues that what is needed today is “to invent a new language, a new culture that is able to see the connection between the social question (the survival of the peoples) and the environmental question (the conservation of the biosphere).”³⁴⁹ This is the challenge that Gudynas and Evia try to face, head-on, and develop for their Latin American companions and readers. They note that in the continent live “two-thirds of the known species of the planet,”³⁵⁰ and it is the area in the world with the highest biodiversity. They speak about the “praxis of death,” a practice of which they are witness: pollution of rivers, lakes and oceans, extinction of species, extreme poverty, desertification, etc. In the light of these realities, they propose new alternatives, “of a new science, a new education, a new praxis at the service of life. Social Ecology is

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 113.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 113.

³⁴⁹ *La Praxis por la Vida*, 6.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 32.

one of these proposed alternatives.”³⁵¹ Recapturing the idea of utopia, Gudynas and Evia already see

seeds of change in our culture, particularly in the relevant contribution of the cultures of the indigenous peoples of Latin America...The utopia points to the re-encounter of the human beings with nature and the human beings among themselves. It is a utopia that unmasks the current ideology, shows its limits... points towards a possible future... mobilizes people... Social ecology is one of the ways toward this utopia.³⁵²

They deeply regret that, historically, the knowledge and experiences of the indigenous peoples have not been taken seriously. In this context, they underline that “it is in the encounter with other people and with the environment where the seed for transformation of their relations lies. These relations should be more just, in solidarity with and respectful of life.”³⁵³

In view of the particular circumstances of Latin America, social ecology makes a preferential option for the poor. Gudynas and Evia argue that “this is due to the fact that the majority in our society is impoverished. They are the ones who have most suffered from the predatory and unequal types of development that have been exported to Latin America.”³⁵⁴ That is their way to refer to capitalism. But the option for the poor is not to forget other sectors of society, such as the impoverished middle classes and the intellectuals. The praxis for life—praxis understood as the conjunction of practice and reflection--should involve everybody, and should be embraced by different peoples and social sectors. This praxis of social ecology, “demands participatory techniques, in which co-participation replaces domination,”³⁵⁵ and is

³⁵¹ Ibid., 15.

³⁵² Ibid., 26.

³⁵³ Ibid., 37.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 46.

³⁵⁵ Ibid, 107.

grounded in an ethics that fundamentally respects life. It is an intentional process, one that requires a clear commitment. In the authors' own words, Latin American social ecology "is an act of commitment with plants and animals, the soil, the water and the air of the ecosystems, and with human beings, that is, with all life."³⁵⁶ Life, in all its diversity and dimensions takes precedence, because "life itself is the first value."³⁵⁷ The participation of all progressive social movements for change is a new pedagogical attempt, an encounter between the environmental education and popular education.³⁵⁸ And all these point finally to a new culture, one which "can gather all available contributions and is able to realize the utopian projects."³⁵⁹

Two other important Latin American contributions to this area need to be mentioned. The first, the book *Crisis, Ecología y Justicia Social*,³⁶⁰ is a collection of the plenary addresses made at the Second Latin-American Encounter on "Culture, Ethics and Religion facing the Ecological Challenge," held in Buenos Aires, December 2-5 1990. Among its contributors are eminent social scientists, theologians and social activists, such as the Argentine liberation philosopher, Enrique Dussel, the Uruguayan Jesuit brother, Jorge Peixoto, and the Brazilian ethicist, Antonio Moser. The Executive Coordinator of the encounter was the Uruguayan scholar, Guillermo Kerber. The second is *O Ecológico e a Teologia Latino-Americana: Articulação e Desafios*, the most

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 205.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 208.

³⁵⁸ Gudynas and Evia follow Carlos Nuñez' definition of "popular education" in his book *Educación para Transformar* (Buenos Aires: Humanitas, 1996) in which he describes education as having the political purpose of transforming social reality, in order to build a new society, one that responds to the aspirations and needs of the popular sectors.

³⁵⁹ *La Praxis por la Vida*, 226.

³⁶⁰ *Crisis, Ecología y Justicia Social* (Montevideo: CIPFE Fundación del Sur, 1991).

recent work of Guillermo Kerber himself,³⁶¹ is the abridged version of his doctoral dissertation completed at the Methodist University of Sao Paulo, Brazil. Kerber, a former co-worker with Eduardo Gudynas in the *Centro de Investigación y Promoción Franciscano y Ecológico* and in the *Multiversidad Franciscana de América Latina*, highlights the relevance and contribution of Social Ecology from the perspective of the South, that is, particularly from Latin America. In his book, his principal focus is the critical analyses of the theological production of two of the main Latin American liberation theologians, namely the Uruguayan, Juan Luis Segundo, and the Brazilian Leonardo Boff. According to Kerber, the work of these scholars shows a clearer awareness of the need to incorporate the ecological dimension/reflection in the theological enterprise. Kerber emphasizes the need for a deeper and fuller articulation between liberation theology and ecology. He also advocates the need to rescue the contributions and theological insights of the indigenous/aboriginal peoples and of the Afro-Americans of the Latin American continent, “to hear again the aboriginal traditions that show a different way in which human beings and the Earth can relate to each other.”³⁶² Kerber argues that Social Ecology has a particular importance for Latin America, particularly among the liberation theologians, since the theological endeavors of Latin American theologians have been closely linked to and heavily influenced by the social sciences.

³⁶¹ Porto Alegre, Brasil: Editoria Sulina, 2006. An approximate English translation would be *Ecology and Latin American Theology: Articulation and Challenges*. Kerber currently serves as a staff member at the headquarters of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, and is responsible for the programme on climate change..

³⁶² Ibid., 201.

Ecojustice

If social ecology, specifically the Bookchinian version, is fundamentally a secular, non-religious, and sometimes even anti-religious philosophical and political theory, Ecojustice, in its manifold expressions, is inspired and motivated by a deep religious conviction and spiritual search. Some Christian theologians even would have liked to have social ecology “baptized” into Christian theological waters. Particularly on this matter, the New Zealander, Richard Davies, articulates with bluntness “I propose Christianizing social ecology.”³⁶³ I think that such an attempt is neither helpful nor necessary. Social ecology does not need any “Christianization” to maintain its validity and integrity.

Eco-justice advocates address a large variety of issues that affect both humankind and “otherkind.” They do it from diverse perspectives and use different disciplines to engage the problems.³⁶⁴ Christian theologians, biblical scholars, and ethicists, equally concerned with the magnitude of the ecological devastation of our planet and with the injustices that plague the human community, have found that the expression *ecojustice* --or *eco-justice*, as some prefer-- somehow encapsulates both concerns. Process theologian, John B. Cobb Jr., argues that the term eco-justice “helps to make clear that there can be no justice today that is not ecologically informed and no commitment to improving the environment that is not motivated by the passion for

³⁶³ Richard Davies, “Towards a Christian Social Ecology,” *Pacifica*, vol. 13, No. 2 (June 2000): 181-201.

³⁶⁴ For a review of the wide spectrum of the issues that eco-justice-concerned people deal with, see William E. Gibson (ed.), *Eco-Justice- The Unfinished Journey* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2004).

justice.”³⁶⁵ Furthermore, after discussing the degrees of values and rights of all creatures, Cobb argues that “concern for individual creatures and for the biosphere must be systematically integrated with commitment to the oppressed.”³⁶⁶ Elsewhere, Cobb argues that “the term eco-justice expresses the determination to hold together the concern for justice as a norm for human relations and the awareness that the human species is part of a larger natural system whose needs must be respected.”³⁶⁷ Therefore, eco-justice can be described as expressing both *economic* and *ecological* justice. The expression is said to have been coined for the first time in 1972 by Richard Jones, a member of the Board of the American Baptist Church in a planning meeting.³⁶⁸ It tries to overcome the seeming rift between the “ecological survival” position, embraced by some eco-theologians, versus the “justice” position, basically represented by the so-called “political or liberation theologians.” Lutheran theologian, H. Paul Santmire, argues in support of the need to go beyond these artificially fixed positions and suggests a series of proposals for a “working consensus.” For him, it is not “an either/or” but a “both /and” situation. Moreover, he challenges biblical scholars to examine anew the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Testament, raising ecological as well as political questions.³⁶⁹ Our main interest at this stage is not to deal with all dimensions of eco-justice. Rather, it is to highlight its main contributions as far as the reading of the Bible is concerned.

³⁶⁵ John B. Cobb Jr. “Postmodern Christianity in Quest of Eco-Justice,” in *After Nature’s Revolt*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 28.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁶⁷ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability, Economics, Ecology, and Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992), 21.

³⁶⁸ See R.L. Sarkar, *The Bible, Ecology and Environment* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 195.

³⁶⁹ H. Paul Santmire, “Ecology, Justice and Theology: Beyond the Preliminary Skirmishes,” *The Christian Century* (May 12, 1976): 460-464.

Advocates of such a current are convinced that they find in both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, a clear witness to the God of justice. Moreover, they claim that a sound reading of the scriptures and a responsible theological and ethical discourse must result in a committed Christian discipleship which is able “to express respect and show care for Earth as God’s creation and life’s home, while seeking justice for a biodiverse otherkind as well as humankind.”³⁷⁰ Ecojustice theologians therefore, argue that God, who created and continues to create, is present in Jesus Christ, as God the Redeemer of the whole creation, and as the Spirit, who sustains all. Therefore, as Hessel and Radford Ruether argue, eco-justice “including specific foci, such as theologies of ecofeminism and of environmental racism... provides a dynamic framework for thought and action that fosters ecological integrity with social-economic justice.”³⁷¹

Eco-justice theologians are aware that there are theological expressions of Christianity and interpretations of the Scriptures that have played a negative influence in the attitudes of Christians toward nature and creation, and that they even “are toxic or are at least complicit in earth destruction.”³⁷² They recognize that there are biblical texts as well as theological traditions that are ambiguous at best and devastating at worst.

Nevertheless, in the context of a world of pervading injustice and ecological destruction, and based on a new understanding of the universe, ecojustice theologians

³⁷⁰ Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Introduction: Current Thought on Christianity and Ecology,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 2000), xxxiii.

³⁷¹ Ibid., xxxvi.

³⁷² Ibid. xxxix.

are challenged to reread again and with new eyes the basic sources of their faith. In so doing, different perspectives appear and voices that were once suppressed are being heard anew. Hessel, in particular, affirms that “eco-justice occurs wherever human beings receive sufficient sustenance and build enough community to live harmoniously with God, each other, and all of nature, while they appreciate the rest of creation for its own sake and not simply as useful to humanity.”³⁷³

H. Paul Santmire, well-aware of the existing ambiguities and complexities in the Christian traditions and of the conflicting arguments about the role of Christianity *vis a vis* the ecological crisis, once cautiously argued that

the theological tradition in the West is neither ecologically bankrupt, as some of its popular and scholarly critics have maintained and as numbers of its own theologians have assumed, nor replete with immediately accessible, albeit long forgotten, ecological riches hidden everywhere in its deeper vaults, as some contemporary Christians, who are profoundly troubled by the environmental crisis and other related concerns, might wistfully hope to find.”³⁷⁴

Later on, Santmire proposed a critical revision of the process that produced the classical theological paradigm of Gods and humans. He speaks of the need to develop a “triangular” one, which includes God, humanity, *and* nature. He came out with a much more positive evaluation of the theological and biblical potential to contribute to the future of planet Earth and its creatures. Moreover, at the closing of his work, he exults in a hope that is close to a dangerous triumphalism:

But, shaped by its ecological and cosmic ritual enactments, and buoyed by its new ecological and cosmic spirituality, this martyr church can rise to this historic occasion today, by the grace of God, to respond to

³⁷³ Dieter Hessel, “Eco-Justice Theology after Nature’s Revolt,” in *After Nature’s Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology*, ed. idem (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 9.

³⁷⁴ H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 8.

what is perhaps an unprecedented calling, to love God and all God's creatures, as one great and glorious extended family, and in so doing to be light to the nations and a city set upon a hill, whose exemplary witness cannot be hidden.³⁷⁵

Dieter Hessel has a more sober assessment of the situation. He claims that the Church needs to be ecologically reformed, and posits eight steps to overcome the “dysfunctional theological habits or alienating themes”³⁷⁶ that handicap the churches in their ecological witness. Among them, he highlights the need to “reexamine Scripture in the context of the deepening eco-justice crisis.”³⁷⁷ Hessel argues for a trifocal perspective for rereading the Bible: from “outdoors” (more attentive to nature), from “below” (God's special regard for the oppressed), and from “abroad” (from churches abroad and other religions).

Ecojustice and the Bible. Brief Excursus on Genesis 1:26-28

Following Lynn White's (in)famous article, and in response to his criticisms, biblical scholars went back to the biblical texts and to the history of the interpretation of these texts. One of the main purposes was to question the validity of White's thesis and to unveil different possible readings, based on other assumptions and criteria. Perhaps one has to agree that there are texts that seem to be difficult to retrieve from an eco-justice perspective. But even with texts that were considered ecologically flawed, scholars--not necessary apologetically-- were trying to rediscover positive connotations and “redeem” them.

³⁷⁵ H. Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 128.

³⁷⁶ Dieter Hessel, “The Church Ecologically Reformed,” in *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response*, ed. Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 187.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 189

One case in point is the study of Genesis 1:28, an often quoted text “God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” The Jewish scholar, Jeremy Cohen, for example, in a detailed and convincing exercise, traced the readings of Rabbis and Christian scholars of the text for more than two thousand years. Among his conclusions--perhaps surprisingly for many--is the fact that

Rarely, if ever, did premodern Jews and Christians construe this verse as a license for the selfish exploitation of the environment. Although most readers of Genesis casually assumed that God had fashioned the physical world for the benefit of human beings, Gen. 1:28 evoked relatively little concern with the issue of domination over nature.³⁷⁸

Why has the text undergone such a radical change in its interpretation? What has changed in the world that has produced such a fundamental shift in its interpretation? Though the complexity of this intricate process and its implications go beyond the reach of this work, some key components, however, need to be highlighted as they are significant for this study.

Among the many variants that one can identify in this complexity, there are, at least, two important elements that may help us to illuminate the radical changes that occurred during the period that goes from the Middle Ages to the era of modernity in the western world. On the one hand, there is the “discovery” and ensuing conquest of the “New World”, resulting in the consequent consolidation of European colonialism and imperialism.”New” territories, and new peoples (not yet considered fully human?) were to be

³⁷⁸ Jeremy Cohen, “*Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It.*” *The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 5.

occupied, “civilized,” and, ultimately, Christianized.³⁷⁹ Spain and Portugal apportioned what is known today as the southern regions of North America, Central and South America and some islands in the Caribbean. England, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France colonized the rest. Vast territories possessing “unknown” raw materials and richness, were seen as readily available for exploitation by “superior” Europeans who saw it all as theirs to claim. Pillage and destruction ensued. The world had changed, and the interpretation of the text seemed to follow suit.

On the other hand, the work of notable intellectual, philosophical, scientific, and theological thinkers supported and underpinned this new enterprise of the “superior” western civilization. The principal representatives of such endeavor were Francis Bacon, Descartes, and Isaac Newton.³⁸⁰ In 1620, Francis Bacon (1561-1622), one of the champions of modern science, wrote *The New Organum* (or *The True Directions Concerning the Interpretation of Nature*), in which he suggested science and (incipient) technology as a way to control nature. Despite his many and interesting contributions in diverse areas of knowledge, his program of dominating nature became the ideology which inspired and governed the “new” scientific research and technological innovations up to the twentieth century. His famous statement about the need to subjugate nature, to press it into delivering its secrets, to tie it to our service and make it our slave, opened a new chapter in the interaction between human

³⁷⁹ See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990).

³⁸⁰ See the interesting and concise analysis of the contribution of these three thinkers in the process of intellectually shaping the modern world view, in Jeremy Rifkin, *Entropy: A New World View* (Toronto, New York, London, Sidney: Bantam Books, 1981), especially pages 19-29.

beings and the rest of the created world. Bacon, together with Descartes (1596-1650)³⁸¹ and Newton (1642-1727) are considered the founding fathers of the modern paradigm, which --among other things-- is basically dualistic: the world is divided into a world of matter and the world of spirit. This model has often been articulated as violent, aggressive, and destructive. From their perspective, knowledge is power, the power to dominate both nature and peoples.³⁸² The French biologist George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707-1788), author among others of *De la maniere d'étudier et de traiter l'histoire naturelle*³⁸³ and *Les Époques de la Nature*³⁸⁴ echoes Bacon and even manages to go farther than his compatriot, Descartes. For Buffon, man is the very owner of nature, "vassal of heaven, he is also King of the earth," as eloquently described by Jean Paul Deléage.³⁸⁵ It is precisely Deléage who remarks that "the scientific interest converges with the colonial policies of the European Estates."³⁸⁶ The role of these scientists as well as others such as

³⁸¹ Descartes claimed that human beings fundamentally intervene in nature to be "the owner and master of nature." See *Discours de la méthode*, Vol.6 (Paris: Seuil, 1965), 60ff.

³⁸² For a spirited analysis, see David Toolan, *At Home in the Cosmos* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 48-58. See also Juergen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 23-32, and Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, 3-21.

³⁸³ Paris: Impr. Royale, 1749; reprinted Impr. nationale, 1986.

³⁸⁴ Critical edition by J. Roger (Paris: Mémoires du Muséum national d'histoire naturelle, 1988).

³⁸⁵ Jean Paul Deléage, *Historia de la Ecología*, trans. Marga Latorre (Barcelona and Montevideo: Icaria-Nordan, 1991), 41. All quotations in English are my translation.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 46. See the interesting and well-documented historical analysis of Deléage on the convergence of interests on pages 45-58. Deléage is a well-known scientist and activist. He is professor of History of Sciences at the University of Paris VIII and also one of the main persons responsible for the formation of the French Green Party (*Les Verts*). In this book, Deléage discusses the close relationship that exists between ecology and politics. Regrettably, and perhaps because he is a prisoner

Copernicus and Vesalius cannot be underestimated. Their thinking and work are by-products of the era of European colonization and expansion.

Moreover, Deléage is not naive. He is aware that “no civilization has been innocent ecologically,”³⁸⁷ but he goes a step further, and in a way similar to (his ignored counterpart from the other side of the Atlantic) Bookchin, places the roots in capitalist expansion. Deléage claims that

the arrival of industrial capitalism from the sixteenth century and its extraordinary expansion since the nineteenth century has produced a true revolution in the collective representation of nature; the principle of solidarity between humans and the physical universe has been replaced by the principle of dominion [see the similar terminology used by Cohen, but this time it is a scientist who speaks] of nature by humans.³⁸⁸

Furthermore, Deléage points to the role that theologians and religions have played in this particular process. He argues that

Between 1500 and 1800, the mandate of Genesis 1:28 ... is transformed under the accumulated influence of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation as well as under the scientism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in one of the fundamental axioms of this [western] culture, and, with it, we witness the beginning of the absolute anthropocentrism in a lasting way.³⁸⁹

of the (still powerful) divide that exists between anglophone writers and French writers—Deléage does not even mention once either Social Ecology or Murray Bookchin. For a person who combines a recognized sound scholarship with a coherent political militancy, the existence of such a *lacuna* is hard to believe.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 283.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 290.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 290. It is interesting to note the inclusion of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in his analysis. Also deserving of note in this context is the challenging article by Enrique Dussel. Dussel’s article carries the suggestive title of “*Hacia una teología de la liberación ecológica*” (Toward a theology of Ecological Liberation). This is a fascinating brief article in which Dussel argues for a re-reading of the later Marx (notably Marx’s 1875 *Critique to the Program of Gotha*), who provides an important contribution toward an ecological theology of liberation. The Argentine philosopher claims that it is capital and not technology, *per se*, that is the root cause of the destruction of nature. Dussel argues that “it is of the essence of

It is also important to emphasize here the phenomenon of the feminization of nature. That is, nature is identified with “women,” thus crowning the androcentric and patriarchal enterprise of western colonialism.³⁹⁰ Ross Bishop argues that “Man was no longer part of nature, he was her master, she was his slave.”³⁹¹ The real slaves worked on plantations and served tea to their white masters.

A mechanistic worldview, which included the disenchanting of the world, starts to dominate. In the words of Carolyn Merchant, a leading environmental historian, “science, technology, and capitalism came together in the seventeenth century to allow a secular version of the reinvention of Eden on earth.”³⁹² Theologians followed suit.

In a discussion of colonialism/postcolonialism, biblical scholar, Stephen Moore, remarks that “ the Bible in general, and specific biblical texts in particular, were used in both systematic and ad hoc ways to authorize the conquest and colonization of Africa, Asia, the Americas, and even pockets of

capital to transform both nature and the person of the worker into mediations...It [capital] has changed the very principle of all ethics: it has put people as means and the commodities (the surplus value) as the end.” The challenge lies, according to Dussel, on the need to liberate technology “from the claws of capital, mainly for the peripheral countries, which badly need technology but are unable to ecologically adapt it.” He concludes by saying that “such an ecological liberation of technology is both a task of an economic and political awareness and also of political organization.” In *Crisis, Ecología y Justicia Social*, 33-40.

³⁹⁰ It is important to note that the identification of women with nature has a much longer history, both in the west and in other cultures.

³⁹¹ “The Rise of Rational Thought,” in www.rossbishop.com/articles/monthly0312RationalThought.htm. November 9, 2005

³⁹² Russel Roch, “A Conversation with Carolyn Merchant,” in www.mindfully.org/Sustainability/CarolynMerchant-Conversations. November 9, 2005.

Europe itself.”³⁹³ As for Genesis 1:26-28, a particular emphasis on “dominion” took precedence over other theological alternatives concerning the role of humans in the earth present in the Hebrew Bible, such as the argument developed in Genesis 2 and 3, for example. Distorted and one-sided interpretations of Genesis 1:26-28 became the fundamental religious underpinning of the new European enterprise. As children of their time, well-meaning theologians found in the Scriptures a sound understanding and theological justification for the presence and activities of European colonialism. Catherine Keller eloquently argues “...for Christians, suppressing indigenous practices in Europe and then in its colonies, ‘heaven’ as the site of ultimate significance, kept us ‘pilgrims’ on the earth—‘This world is not my home.’ The modern ecological ravaging of the planet followed...”³⁹⁴ Moltman claims that in the Renaissance, the new picture of an almighty God, *potentia absoluta*, brought as a consequence that “God’s image on earth, the human being (which in actual practice meant the man) [and basically the European man, I might add] had to strive for power and domination so that he might acquire *his* divinity.”³⁹⁵ Again, Cohen remarks that “In the case of Gen.1:28, modern scholars have retrojected contemporary concern with the dominion over nature onto Scripture’s call to ‘fill the earth and master it...’”³⁹⁶ Albert de Pury, Old Testament scholar at the University of Geneva, in an interesting article, claims that “The ‘rule’ entrusted to

³⁹³ “Colonialism/Postcolonialism,” in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. A.K.M. Adam (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000), 186.

³⁹⁴ Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 59.

³⁹⁵ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 27.

³⁹⁶ *Be Fertile and Increase*, 314.

humanity does not necessarily imply for human the ability or the right to intervene.”³⁹⁷

It is clear for Cohen that the issue of domination, as understood in modernity, is alien to the spirit of the text. Positively, he argues that “Jurists, preachers, mystics, and philosophers...focused on this verse (1) as an expression of God’s relationship with all humanity and (2) as an expression of the tension between the universal commitment and God’s election of a single people.”³⁹⁸ The main purpose of these reflections is to show that there are other possible biblical readings that can be “neither ecocidal nor imperial,” to paraphrase the German New Testament scholar, Brigitte Kahl.³⁹⁹

Hessel is adamant in his endeavor to take the Bible seriously for ecologically concerned communities. There are times in which his comments seem to resemble those of a preacher. For instance, he claims that

The Bible offers hidden treasure to ecologically alert readers who appreciate contemporary science and bring to bear insights gained from archeological research and sociological and literary methods of interpretation. Rereading biblical passages from the perspective of earth community cuts through an overlay of modern anthropocentric misinterpretation, exposing how much Scripture has to offer as a critique of nature manipulation and destructive development. The Bible turns out to be a resource for celebrating daily life and guiding our ultimate redemption with (*not* apart from) the rest of nature.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁷ Albert de Pury, “Genesis 1 in its Historical Context and Today’s Ecological Concerns,” in *Listening to Creation Groaning*, ed. Lukas Vischer (Geneva: Centre International Réformé John Knox, 2004), 72.

³⁹⁸ *Be Fertile and Increase*, 6.

³⁹⁹ Brigitte Kahl, “Fratricide and Ecocide: Rereading Genesis 2-4,” in *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church’s Response*, ed. Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Fortress Pres, 2001), 54.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 190.

Eco-justice scholars point out texts that are significant in this matter: God is the God of justice and liberation, who hears the cry of God's people and comes to their rescue and liberation (Exodus 3:7-8). They highlight texts such as Exodus 23, and Leviticus 19 and 25, with their particular emphasis on the Sabbath and the Jubilee, the concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the sojourner.⁴⁰¹ The Sabbath and the Jubilee are opportunities to break down the chain of oppression and allow justice to be the norm again among peoples and among them and the land. For Christoph Uelhinger, both are an "expression of the awareness of what today we would call ecological balance... where "social equilibrium [the rights of the workers, the strangers and the poor] and concern for animals are interwoven."⁴⁰² Despite patriarchal motifs, eco-justice scholars, like Hessel and others, see the importance of lifting up the second creation saga, part of a text that among scholars is known as J (Gen 2:4b-3:24), where אָדָם, "man" or "mankind,"⁴⁰³ or simply the human, is formed from אֶרֶץ, the "red plowed land,"⁴⁰⁴ "humus,"⁴⁰⁵ or "the dust of the ground" as the NRSV translates (Gen 2:7), or just "topsoil". Here the humans and all living creatures are made from the same substance as the earth and they are acknowledged as being mutually interdependent. Furthermore, to the human is given the task "to till and keep" (Gen 2:15) the garden that the Lord God has created. The word used here means

⁴⁰¹ On this question, see the contributions of Jewish and Christian scholars in Hans Ucko, ed., *The Jubilee Challenge: Utopia or Possibility?* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), and John Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), particularly chapter 3.

⁴⁰² Christoph Uelhinger, "The Cry of the Earth?: Biblical Perspectives on Ecology and Violence," in *Ecology and Poverty: Cry of the Poor, Cry of the Earth*, ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo (London: SCM Press, 1995), 43

⁴⁰³ See Fritz Maas, אָדָם in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol.1, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 75.

⁴⁰⁴ See J.G. Ploger, אֶרֶץ in *ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

“to serve.”⁴⁰⁶ The humans are there not to destroy, plunder, or exploit, but to keep, to serve the earth. When the fair relationship is broken, and justice is absent, then, even the “land mourns and all who live in it languish” (Hos 4: 3).

It is also to be noted the importance of the Noachic covenant, where God makes a pact (ברית) with Noah, who represents humankind, and with “every living creature that is with you for all future generations” (Gen 9: 12). The whole creation is part and parcel of the covenant with God. The creation Psalms (e.g. Ps 24; 104, 145, and 148) as well as other texts of the Wisdom Literature, such as Job 38-41, illustrate a relational integrity and mutuality of all creatures, affirm the goodness of creation, praise the Creator, and proclaim that all that is belongs to God. Proverbs 8 speaks of a particular presence of God in creation and through lady Wisdom, who created “before the beginning of the earth” (Prov 8:23) and rejoices in God’s inhabited world (8:31).

⁴⁰⁷ Hassel also highlights the importance of the prophetic message of justice found particularly in Amos and Micah, as well as in the Isaiah’s visions of *shalom*, found in chapter 55 and 65.

Larry Rasmussen argues that the Hebrew Bible bears witness to a God who “was a moral force that rejected the inevitability of oppression and injustice and commanded and made possible the transformation of the world on the terms of

⁴⁰⁶ See Theodor Hiebert, “Rethinking Traditional Approaches to Nature in the Bible,” in *Theology for Earth Community: A Field Guide*, ed. Dieter Hessel (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 30.

⁴⁰⁷ For a convincing overview of similar texts, see Gene M. Tucker, “Rain on a Land Where no One Lives: The Hebrew Bible on the Environment,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116/1 (Spring 1997): 3-17.

community.”⁴⁰⁸ This very idea of community/ communities, of interrelatedness and solidarity among humans and the “more than humans” also constitutes a pivotal force for eco-justice theologians. Furthermore, Jewish liberation theologian, Michael Lerner, beautifully combines two fundamental convictions of the Jewish people, the goodness of creation and the crucial role of justice. He claims that Judaism was “not just a religion about how wonderful the physical world is, but a religion that insisted there is nothing inevitable about the hierarchies of the social world.”⁴⁰⁹

Moreover, eco-justice scholars claim that the New Testament inherits and assumes the fundamental witness of the Hebrew Bible. In this respect, and reading with ecologically sensitive eyes, they highlight texts that express the concern for creation as a whole. The Gospel of John, for example, proclaims that God loves the *kosmos*, the world, God’s creation (John 3:16). Paul, in his letter to the Romans, argues that both the whole creation (*pasa he ktisis*) and the human beings groan, waiting for adoption and redemption (Rom 8: 22-23). In the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul proclaims that “in Christ, God was reconciling the world (*kosmos*) to himself” (2 Cor.5:19). This concern for creation is also present in the deutero-Pauline literature, in a “hymn of creation and reconciliation,”⁴¹⁰ in which Christ is described as “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation...all things (*ta panta*) have been created through him and for him... and in him all things hold together” (Col 1: 15-17). In the concluding visions of the book of Revelation, John sees the fulfillment of the prophecies, in “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1),

⁴⁰⁸ Larry Rasmussen, “Theology of Life and Ecumenical Ethics,” in *Ecotheology: Voices from the South and the North*, ed. David G. Hallman (Maryknoll, New York and Geneva: Orbis Books and WCC Publications, 1994), 113.

⁴⁰⁹ Cited by Rasmussen, *ibid*, 114.

⁴¹⁰ Ulrich Duchrow and Gerhard Liedke, *Shalom: Biblical Perspectives on Creation, Justice and Peace* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989), 53.

and the nations being healed by the leaves of the tree of life (Rev. 22:2). The attempt for a reconstructive reading of the Scripture is a pivotal undertaking for eco-justice theologians, and the pioneering work of biblical scholars serves as a foundation for their theological discourse.

In 1978, eco-justice/ecofeminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether, understood the prophetic text of Isaiah 24 as a vivid portrait of the close relationship between natural hostility and the unjust social order. She argues that “the restoration of just relations between peoples restores peace to society and, at the same time, heals nature’s enmity. Just, peaceful societies in which people are not exploited also create peaceful, harmonious and beautiful natural environments. *This outcome is the striking dimension of the biblical vision.*”⁴¹¹ In a later and very significant book, *Gaia and God*, she prefers to delve into two main lines of the biblical traditions to retrieve what she calls “reclaimable resources for an ecological spirituality and practice.”⁴¹² While she recognizes that there are also resources in other religious traditions and spiritualities, Radford Ruether chooses to focus on the covenantal as well as on the sacramental traditions, as possible resources for healing the wounds of the world. She is well aware that these traditions “are marked by a legacy of patriarchalism and must be reinterpreted, if they are to be genuinely affirming of dominated women, men, and nature. Even then the question of whether they can be adequately liberated and made liberating will remain.” Radford Ruether also carries out convincing historical research on the origins of patriarchal societies and domination and call for new forms of gender parity and “new understandings of culture and power relations in all

⁴¹¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Biblical Vision of the Ecological Crisis,” *The Christian Century* 95, no.22 (1978): 1132. Emphasis mine.

⁴¹² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 205.

dimensions of society.”⁴¹³ Her conclusions show notable coincidences with the basic convictions of social ecology, as discussed by Murray Bookchin. Radford Ruether argues that

The search for an ecological culture and society seems to demand three elements: (1) the rebuilding of primary and regional communities, in which people can understand and take responsibility for the ecosystem of which they are part; (2) just relations between humans that accept the right of all members of the community to an equitable share in the means of subsistence; and (3) an overcoming of the culture of competitive alienation and domination for compassionate solidarity.⁴¹⁴

She concurs with the findings of Jeremy Cohen on the fact that the “modern European dualism of history and nature distorts the biblical perspective.”⁴¹⁵ For her, “the covenantal vision recognizes that humans and other life forms are part of one family, sisters and brothers in one community of interdependence.”⁴¹⁶ Radford Ruether claims that the sacramental tradition understands Christ as creator and redeemer of the whole cosmos, as described in the letter to the Colossians (1:15-20), and traces the history of this particular theological understanding. Elsewhere, she calls it “the concept of the cosmos as the body of God,”⁴¹⁷ found, for her, in the Pauline epistles and in the Gospel of John. Finally, she calls for an ecofeminist theocosmology, an ecological spirituality which expresses the deepest links of all human beings with the living *Gaia*.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 172.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 201.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 297.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 227.

⁴¹⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Eco-feminism and Theology,” in *Ecotheology: Voices from the South and North*, 203. This particular feminist approach to an ecological theology is further developed by Sallie McFague in *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), and from a Latin American perspective by Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

Social Ecology and Ecojustice: Some key hermeneutical principles for an exegetical strategy.

The principles listed below do not arise out of a vacuum. They are the result of research and critical historical analysis that Murray Bookchin and other social ecologists as well as ecojustice theologians have produced. They are the fruit of a thorough “process oriented dialectical approach” ⁴¹⁸ in the study of the development of “organic societies” to the present modern capitalist societies. These “complex and protracted developments” --in the words of Bookchin--reflect the characteristic of being uneven and erratic. These principles are not presented here as final, generally accepted concepts. They share the Janus-faced ambiguity inherent in any proposal for reading Scriptures. They are used here as *one* more additional contribution to the continuous wave of interpretation of the biblical texts –adding to “the inevitability of multiple interpretations”—and, in no way, as *the* contribution, thus advancing a supposedly absolute and universally-valid hermeneutical claim. Again, I do not pretend that these principles exhaust the meaning and richness of the texts. There are many other perspectives that can be used in reading any particular texts. They sometimes may be complementary, sometimes contradictory and dissimilar. In other words, the texts are not wholly and exhaustively interpreted even through the use of different exegetical lenses, including this particular set of principles. These principles are neither independent from one another nor water-tight autonomous statements. On the contrary, they need to be seen in their close interrelationship and interpenetration, as they overlap, reinforce, and complement one another. These principles will be applied to the selected texts of this research. Not all principles will be applied to each

⁴¹⁸ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom* , 13.

text. In what follows, I will limit myself simply to propose the principles and withhold specific application to the biblical texts to the ensuing exegetical chapters.

I Principle of interdependence between wholeness and diversity, reciprocity and complementarity. Reality is constituted by unity and diversity, by unity of diversity, and by unity in diversity.

For Bookchin, this is not only the core, but also the principal goal of Social Ecology. He claims that “the goal of Social Ecology is wholeness, and not mere adding together of innumerable details collected at random and interpreted subjectively and insufficiently.”⁴¹⁹ John Clark’s concise definition of Social Ecology points out with validity that it “starts from the basic principle of unity in organic diversity, and affirms that the well-being of the whole can only be achieved through the rich individuality and the complex interaction of the parts.”⁴²⁰ Furthermore, Bookchin aware that words in specific contexts can easily be misunderstood, Bookchin adds that “ecological wholeness is not an immutable homogeneity but rather the very opposite – a dynamic *unity of diversity*”⁴²¹ and that “wholeness is not to be mistaken for a spectral ‘oneness,’... it is a richly articulated structure with a history and

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁴²⁰ John Clark, “What is social ecology?” *Trumpeter* 5:2 (Spring 1988): 72. Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff speaks of the need to “...stress the reciprocity and complementarity existing between all human beings” (*Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, 87). Further reflections can be found in Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (London: Intertext Books, 1972), 437ff. In a more poetic vein, Italian Humberto Eco cites the Franciscan friar William of Baskerville-- one who knew how to read in the book of nature-- saying: “...the beauty of the cosmos not only proceeds from the unity in variety, but also from the variety in the unity.” See *El nombre de la rosa*, trans. Ricardo Pochtar (Madrid: Diario *El País*, 2005), 24.

⁴²¹ *The Ecology of Freedom*, 24.

internal logic of its own.”⁴²² Furthermore, he adds that contrary to meaning a “bleak undifferentiated ‘universality’... [wholeness] comprises the variegated structures, the articulations, and the mediations that impart to the whole a rich variety of forms and thereby add unique qualitative properties to what a strictly analytic mind often reduces to ‘innumerable’ and ‘random’ details.”⁴²³ Besides, while bridging the realms of nature and society, and in a historical perspective, Bookchin argues that “what makes unity in diversity in nature more than a suggestive ecological metaphor for unity in diversity in society is the underlying philosophical concept of wholeness. By wholeness, I mean varying levels of actualization, an unfolding of the wealth of particularities that are latent in an as-yet-undeveloped potentiality.”⁴²⁴

II. *Principle of the preferential option for the poor and the marginalized.*

This methodological and *evangelical* (meaning as having been taken from the gospel) assertion is perhaps the most important contribution from Latin America liberation theology. From among committed social ecologists, it was pioneered by Eduardo Gudynas, who underscores the importance of such an approach. Gudynas and Evia recall the now famous dictum of Brazilian sociologist, Josué de Castro, “a pobreza é o maior problema ambiental da América Latina.”⁴²⁵ They speak that one of the options for social ecology “is the preferential option for the popular sectors.”⁴²⁶ This is echoed in key ecojustice or liberation theology texts: Leonardo Boff argues

⁴²² Ibid., 23.

⁴²³ Ibid., 23.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁴²⁵ “Poverty is the main environmental problem in Latin America.” *La praxis por la vida*, 24.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 46.

from the first line of his seminal study, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, that “the most threatened of nature’s creatures today are the poor,” and develops his argument in support of the importance of the evangelical option.⁴²⁷ Already Gustavo Gutierrez in his now classical text, *A Theology of Liberation*, claimed that “in the Bible, poverty is a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God.”⁴²⁸ Furthermore, and in order not to fall into general or vague considerations, Gutierrez tried to identify the poor as the “oppressed one, the one margined from society, the member of the proletariat struggling for his [sic] most basic rights; he [sic] is the exploited and plundered social class, the country struggling for its liberation.”⁴²⁹ Importantly, Uruguayan social ecologist, Jorge Peixoto, advocates a new contextualization for this insight and argues that it is necessary to reformulate the option for the poor, because this cannot be made outside of the complex interrelation with the environment.

III. *Principle of interrelationships between economics, ecology and politics.*

At the root of the ecological predicament one also finds a deep socio-economic, political and ethical problem. That is, ecology and economics are intimately related, and not only etymologically. Ecological justice and economic justice (the rules of the household) go hand in hand. They constitute the two sides of the same coin. Justice for the earth and all its inhabitants, that is, the earth community, and justice among all of earth’s creatures are pivotal

⁴²⁷ *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 1 *et passim*.

⁴²⁸ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*. Translated and edited by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 291.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 301. Today one can both widen the description and focus into other social expressions of the ‘poor’ with the help of gender, racial, and ethnic categories of analysis.

to sustain the integrity of the whole creation. Hessel and Radford Ruether put in an eloquent fashion: “all being on earth make up one household (*oikos*), which benefits from an economy (*oikonomia*) that takes ecological and social stewardship (*oikonomos*) seriously. Eco-justice provides a dynamic framework for thought and action that fosters ecological integrity with social-economic justice.”⁴³⁰ Already from the pre-history of the reflections on ecology, as Jean-Paul Deléage, clearly points out, “human economy is thought of in terms of nature and the economy of nature is described in terms of the economy of the humans,”⁴³¹ as Swedish scientist Linneus attests. Moreover, Deléage also sees the connections between the three concepts when he states that “the discovery of these new worlds, their exploration and exploitation have played an important role in the progressive transformation of natural history in a sort of political economy of nature, which anticipates ecology.”⁴³²

Furthermore, it is to be noted that in modern democratic societies, politics-- “where the real battles are fought,” to quote biblical scholar Benny Liew’s friend,⁴³³ despite its many understandings and uses-- is considered as one of the main means by which to achieve justice and freedom for all peoples. U.S. scholar, Eric Thurman, underlining the role of politics in connection to biblical studies, claims, that “[P]olitical critics bring to their interpretative interests a concern for the material conditions of people’s everyday lives and the complex way biblical texts may underwrite existing injustices or provide

⁴³⁰ *Christianity and Ecology*, xxxvi.

⁴³¹ *Historia de la Ecología*, 37-38.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴³³ Tat-Siong Benny Liew, *Politics of Parousia: Reading Mark Inter(textually)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 1999), ix.

alternative social models and warrants for change.”⁴³⁴ Therefore, the interactions and inter connections among the three disciplines is of the essence.

IV. *Principle of the dignity and integrity of Life, and of its need for defense.*

In a society whose unjust social, ecological, and economic structures seems to be geared towards the early and untimely death for the majority of its people, the defense, improvement and sustainability of life and of life-enhancing changes acquire pivotal importance. Here again is Gudynas who leads the way. He maintains this principle unequivocally. Speaking about the “praxis of death,” in our society (pollution of rivers, lakes and oceans, extinction of species, extreme poverty, desertification, etc.) Gudynas proposes new alternatives, “of a new science, a new education, a new praxis at the service of life.”⁴³⁵ His compatriot and director of the *Centro de Investigación y Promoción Franciscano y Ecológico*, Jorge Peixoto, argues that the defense of life is a daily and permanent task, a task which is grounded in human dignity itself. He questions the myth of unlimited growth, reminds us how the indigenous peoples die too early, and that in Latin America, the actual equation is more poor people and less life.

V. *Principle of radicality, utopian thinking and revolutionary disfuncionality.*

Bookchin is convinced that “partial ‘solutions’ serve merely as cosmetics to conceal the deep-seated nature of the ecological crisis.”⁴³⁶ Furthermore, he adds that the reconstructive utopian thinking is based on the realities of human experience: “what *should* be could become what *must* be, if humanity and the

⁴³⁴ Eric Thurman, “Politics,” in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. A. K. M. Adam, (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000), 174.

⁴³⁵ *La Praxis por la vida*, 15. My translation.

⁴³⁶ *The Ecology of Freedom*, 3.

biological complexity on which it rest were to survive.”⁴³⁷ With a clear cut conviction, he adds, “Our world, it would appear, will either undergo revolutionary changes, so far-reaching in character that humanity will totally transform its social relations and its very conception of life or it will suffer an apocalypse that may well end humanity’s tenure on the planet.”⁴³⁸ Bookchin is convinced that “we can no longer afford to do without utopian thinking. The crises are too serious and the possibilities too sweeping to be resolved by customary modes of thought –the very sensibility that produced these crises in the first place.”⁴³⁹ This is the equivalent of Kuhn’s radical “paradigm change,”⁴⁴⁰ and advocates for the creation of new, radical, revolutionary, and aberrant/dysfunctional (for the current system), counter-hegemonic forms of organizations in order to help to create the new to come.

VI. *Principle of critique and the decentralization of power.*

As a critical observer/participant of the fall of the so-called, “real socialism” in former central and eastern European countries and as an anarchist, Bookchin is extremely suspicious of the (mis)handling of political power and of its effects on people and societies. Centralized political and social power has proven to have devastating results developing the capacity to stifle people’s creativity and libertarian

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁴⁰ For an interpretation of Kuhn’s reflections and their implications for both theology and ecology, see Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), 31ff; Kerber, *O Ecológico e a Teologia Latino-Americana: Articulação e Desafios*, 156; Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis: Ecology, Feminism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 278ff; and Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 11ff.

initiatives. He argues for “the need of direct democracy, for urban decentralization, for a high measure of self-sufficiency, for self empowerment based on communal forms of social life – in short, the nonauthoritarian Commune composed of communes.”⁴⁴¹ Therefore, in his view, Communalism, confronts, challenges, and engages the question of political power. In his understanding, decentralization means “the human scale that would make an intimate and direct democracy possible.”⁴⁴² Bookchin speaks of “reempowerment” both in personal and public terms,⁴⁴³ and suggests the formation of libertarian institutions that, in his view, are *peopled* institutions, literally, and not metaphorically. These institutions should be “based on participation, involvement, and a sense of citizenship that stresses activity, not on the delegation of power and spectatorial politics.”⁴⁴⁴ Following Bookchin, social ecologists advocate a kind of direct democracy that “is ultimately the most advanced form of direct action... it is a sensitivity, a vision of citizenship and selfhood that assumes the free individual has the capacity to manage social affairs in a direct, ethical, and rational manner.”⁴⁴⁵

VII. *Principle of correlation between exploitation of humans by humans and exploitation of nature.*

For Bookchin, Social Ecology “is meant to express the *reconciliation* of nature and human society in a new ecological sensibility and a new ecological society – a

⁴⁴¹ *The Ecology of Freedom*, 2.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 21. In the last chapter of this book, entitled “An Ecological Society”, Bookchin dwells largely on the main features of the concept of communalism, and depicts the society both in realistic and poetic ways. Actually, he dares to propose a concrete and, at the same time, paradoxical utopian description, ranging from food production, animals and landscape to the use of parks, water, clothing and utensils. See *The Ecology of Freedom*, 343-347.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 339.

reharmonization of nature and humanity through a reharmonization of human with human.”⁴⁴⁶ Among other things, for him, reharmonization and reconciliation entails the stopping of people’s economic exploitation, which is at the root of the exploitation of nature by humans. Bookchin speaks of the close interrelations that exists among the “triad of domination” represented by *classism* (domination of humans by humans), *sexism* (domination of women by men), and *specieism* (domination of nature by humans).⁴⁴⁷ For social ecologists, the concept of the domination of nature by humans emerged gradually from a much broader social development, that is, the domination of humans by humans. French scholar Maurice Godelier takes Bookchin’s basic assertion and reinforces the idea: “Everywhere appears a close link between the way nature is used and the way humans are used.”⁴⁴⁸ One can well translate this principle of social ecology as human sin, in biblical terms.

VIII. *Principle of equality and critique of domination and hierarchy.*

Bookchin claims that equality is not just a blanket concept that homogenizes people, nor is it the “*bourgeois* right” with its claim of “equality for all.” He observes that “to assume that everyone is ‘equal’ is patently preposterous.”⁴⁴⁹ For social ecologists, sexism and patriarchalism, as well as ageism are expressions of hierarchical domination. His understanding of hierarchy is overarching, and goes beyond the traditional borderline of economics and politics. By hierarchy, he means “the cultural, traditional and psychological systems of obedience and command, not merely the economic and political

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 121.

⁴⁴⁸ Maurice Godelier, *L’Idéal et le réel*. Cited in Deléage, *Historia de la Ecología*, 283.

⁴⁴⁹ *The Ecology of Freedom*, 144.

systems to which the terms classes and State most appropriately refer.”⁴⁵⁰

Moreover, hierarchy seems to be an encompassing reality that affects all aspects of life. Bookchin argues that historically, “[hierarchy] established itself not only objectively, in the real, workaday world, but also subjectively, in the individual unconscious.”⁴⁵¹ In his claims for a social ecology that is really transformative, he observes that “what ultimately distinguishes an ecological outlook is uniquely liberatory is the challenge it raises to conventional notions of hierarchy.”⁴⁵² Furthermore, he adds that a society may eliminate social injustice, but that in itself does not necessarily means achieving social freedom or social equality. He is radical on this front too, because in his understanding, hierarchy, per se, threatens the very existence of social life. He argues that “we may eliminate classes and exploitation, but we will not be spared from the trammels of hierarchy and domination.”⁴⁵³

Conclusions.

Platonism and Aristotelianism were ancient philosophical currents that were used by Christian theologians at different moments as fundamental theories to develop their own theological constructions. These theologians did not need to “baptize” them to consider them acceptable or palatable for their undertakings. *Mutatis mutandis*, there is no need to Christianize social ecology, but as with the classical traditions, there is much insight that can be gained. The discipline stands on its own feet without

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁵² Ibid., 25.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 8.

any need for adding to it any kind of religious varnish. Its main tenets and arguments have their own integrity and value. Social ecology provides analytical tools to understand the ecological crisis as well as a political theory for organization and action, but, as this chapter has shown, its perspective is often present in the reflections of ecojustice theologians.

One basic assumption is that these two disciplines can provide a meaningful hermeneutical framework to read the Bible, particularly the New Testament. I would like to highlight here some of the basic convictions of social ecology and ecojustice, as helpful tools with which to look to New Testament texts and ideas.

First, the goal of social ecology is wholeness, understood as a mutual interdependence, as unity of and in diversity. This creative tension and dialectical understanding respects and affirms both terms. Far from being “unifying sameness”, it strongly affirms alterity and diversity.⁴⁵⁴ Second, social ecology strongly suggests the importance of utopian thinking in the construction of new realities, and proposes profound changes in culture, tradition, social structure as well as in the individual psyche. It argues for radical and all-encompassing changes, a profound conversion of peoples and societies. Third, it affirms the need for the elimination of all kinds of hierarchies and domination at all levels, and strives for the building up of egalitarian partnerships, gender-wise, and structures of justice in society. This ecological society is based on mutual care and communitarian values. Fourth, social ecology proposes a model of social and political organization that is suspicious of centralization of power.

⁴⁵⁴ On “wholeness,” see the relevant comments by Sharon Becker, “Monstrosities, Miracles, and Mission: Religion and the Ethics of Disablement,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Naussner and Myra Rivera (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2004), 80.

Such a model is, therefore, based on democratic decentralized communities, and based on neighborhoods, towns and villages. These communities are places where human solidarity replaces material gain and egotism. Finally, it aspires to be a movement that empowers and privileges the poor and the marginalized, and that is committed to the defense of life in all its manifold diversity and manifestations.

Ecojustice traces its deep roots in the Hebrew Bible and considers the Scripture as a fundamental reference point for its theological and ethical discourses. Ecojustice scholars start their reflections taking into consideration the injustices that prevail today, be they racism, sexism, classism and the injustice done to mother earth-both locally and globally. In dialogue with social sciences and the Scriptures, they propose new alternatives for a committed Christian discipleship, a discipleship which is already part of the new creation (*kaine ktisis*) promised in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:17), because it is in him, that all are one. As Paul adamantly writes to the Galatians, subverting established hierarchical structures, “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).⁴⁵⁵ The two disciplines share a basic common concern: the well-being all the whole creation, and the building of just and meaningful human societies.

Therefore, using the above-mentioned principles we will now lookr into the New Testament with the reminder with which Brazilian biblical scholar, Nancy Cardoso Pereyra, addresses her readers: “La lectura militante y popular que hacemos de la Biblia en América Latina es un ejercicio apasionado de investigación y de estudio, de crítica y de análisis... pero siempre explicitando el lugar privilegiado de la

⁴⁵⁵ See further in chapter four of this dissertation.

interpretación de la historia: la lucha de los hombres y mujeres pobres por su liberación.”⁴⁵⁶ That is, in English: “The militant and popular reading of the Bible in Latin America is a passionate exercise of research and study, critique and analysis... but always making explicit the privileged place of interpretation of history: the struggle of poor men and women for their liberation.”

⁴⁵⁶ Nancy Cardoso Pereyra, “Propaganda o Historia?: Cuestiones Metodológicas sobre anales e inscripciones militares, profecías y resistencia.” in *RIBLA, Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana* 48, (2004/2): 51-61. English translation is mine.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NATURAL WORLD AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

... a science is any discipline in which the fool of this generation can go beyond the point reached by the genius of the last generation.

Max Gluckman⁴⁵⁷

The latecomer on the exegetical scene knows full well that his reading of the passage is simple one more added to a long list of predecessors with which it will immediately be compared.

Jean Starobinsky⁴⁵⁸

Introduction.

It is commonly agreed that most New Testament writers were Jewish and well versed in the Jewish Holy Scriptures. It was their Bible, the only one they knew. They made use of the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, including Greek translation of some Aramaic texts as well as texts composed only in Greek. The Septuagint was commonly used by the Jews in the Mediterranean diaspora. The New Testament writers cited it, sometimes *verbatim*, sometimes paraphrasing it and, at other times, making references to it rather loosely. In any case, the New Testament writings presuppose the Hebrew Bible and they are hardly understandable without it. In his popular book, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, Marcus J. Borg puts it squarely: "There is far more continuity between the two than the later division

⁴⁵⁷ Anthropologist. Cited in Jeremy Rifkin, *Entropy: A New World Order* (Toronto, New York, London, Sydney: Bantam Books, 1981), 33.

⁴⁵⁸ Jean Starobinsky, "An essay in Literary Analysis-- Mark 5:1-20," *The Ecumenical Review* 23, (October 1971): 377.

between Judaism and Christianity suggests. Not only is the Hebrew Bible part of the Christian Bible, but it was *the* sacred scripture for Jesus, his followers, the early Christian movement, and the authors of the New Testament.”⁴⁵⁹ Furthermore, Borg claims that the Hebrew Bible was more than a revered sacred book for the members of the early Jesus movements; and he contends that it “provided the language of the sacred imagination, that place within the psyche in which images of God, the God-world relationship, and the God-human relationship reside.”⁴⁶⁰

It is precisely in reflecting on this area of God-world relationship that the contribution of Richard Bauckham becomes particularly relevant. In a brief but penetrating essay, Bauckham critiques New Testament interpretations that suffer from what he calls “the prevalent ideology of the modern West which for two centuries or so has understood human history as emancipation from nature.”⁴⁶¹ Bauckham claims that “in continuity with the OT tradition, it [the NT] assumes that humans live in mutuality with the rest of God’s creation, that salvation history and eschatology do not lift humans out of nature but heal precisely their distinctive relationship with the rest of nature.”⁴⁶² Thus, the New Testament scholar sets out to analyze the text “against the background of early Jewish perceptions of the relation between humans and wild animals...,”⁴⁶³ and takes stock of the rich Jewish tradition in this particular area. Bauckham’s remarkable essay ranks among one the most complete studies from an

⁴⁵⁹ Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but not Literally* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 185.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴⁶¹ Bauckham, “Jesus and the Wild Animals (Mark 1:13): A Christological Image for an Ecological Age,” in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ. Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 3.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*

ecological perspective of the gospel of Mark. It is to be noted that Mark is the only gospel that includes --besides the Satan and the angels-- non-human species, i.e. animals, in the narrative of Jesus in the wilderness. There are four words that Mark uses in 1:13 (*ên meta tôn thêrion*) which seem to have passed over by the other two evangelists who also take up the story.

Bauckham studies the text in a holistic manner and argues that “It is one of the biblical resources for developing a Christology whose concern for the relationship of humanity to God will not exclude but include humanity’s relationship to the rest of God’s creatures.”⁴⁶⁴ Already here we can find a certain common understanding reflected in the first principle of Social Ecology/ecojustice, that is, the principle of interdependence between wholeness and diversity, unity and diversity, unity of diversity, and unity in diversity. The goal of Social Ecology, Bookchin reminds us, is wholeness.⁴⁶⁵

Bauckham calls attention to the fact that the wilderness (*eremos*) basically refers to the nonhuman sphere, or, using other ecological terms, to the more than human world, to otherkind. He also makes mention of the traditional Jewish understanding of *thêria*, and concludes that “Mark portrays Jesus in peaceable companionship with animals which were habitually perceived as inimical and threatening to humans.”⁴⁶⁶

Bauckham explores the Jewish tradition against which the text should be read. In his opinion, this tradition “saw the enmity of wild animals as a distortion of the

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁶⁵ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 22.

⁴⁶⁶ Bauckham, “Jesus and the Wild Animals,” 10.

created relationship of humans and wild animals and the result of human sin.”⁴⁶⁷ Furthermore, he adds that the Jewish tradition, including postbiblical and rabbinic literature, envisages two ways to restore the relationship, one individual and one eschatological. The latter basically refers to the messianic age and is mainly represented in texts such as Hosea 2:18 and Isaiah 11:6-9. This background leads Bauckham to conclude that “Jesus does not restore the paradisaal state as such, but he sets the messianic precedent for it.”⁴⁶⁸ Bauckham brings his study to a close by making reference to the intrinsic value of created beings, in this case, the animals, “affirming them as creatures who share the world with us in the community of God’s creation.”⁴⁶⁹

Another interesting contribution worth mentioning here is the study by the Australian New Testament scholar William Loader in the Earth Bible series.⁴⁷⁰ Loader reads Mark 1:1-15 in the light of the Earth Bible principles and asks whether the *euangelion*, the “good news” which Mark announces is also good news for the Earth. Loader focuses on certain key “ecological” terms in the text, such as wilderness, heavens, dove, etc, and argues that “Mark’s theology would not be a source of distraction from Earth but generate a sense of solidarity in which the oneness with humanity might have expressed itself also as a oneness with the life that we live on

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 20. John Paul Heil disagrees with Bauckham in his study entitled “Jesus with the Wild Animals in Mark 1:13,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68 (Jan. 2006): 63-78. : Heil concludes his study claiming that “ it does not mean that he [Jesus] is the new Adam who restores a paradisaal coexistence with the wild animals. Rather, Jesus- being with the wild animals is part of his being tested by Satan and thus being trained in the wilderness as God’s Son, just as Israel as God’s Son was tested and trained in the wilderness during the exodus event.” (77).

⁴⁷⁰ “Good News—for the Earth? Reflections on Mark 1:1-15,” in *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, 28-43.

Earth.”⁴⁷¹ He views the image of the wilderness as “a place of hope in transition,”⁴⁷² as well as a “vestibule of hope.”⁴⁷³ These are compelling insights which locates the text in a constructive ecological perspective. Furthermore, Loader reads in John the Baptist and in Jesus’ return to the wilderness, a challenge and a confrontation of lifestyle choices. He claims that “By calling many to abandon wealth, land and family, Jesus was subverting traditional values and calling for a radical reassessment of priorities. At one level his challenge could bring dislocation. At another it invited a new and different relationship to land and to people.”⁴⁷⁴ It is evident that he is referring to the Kingdom of God. For Loader, “it is a logical extension of his teaching elsewhere to assume that Jesus’ vision of God’s reign would include also a right relationship with creation, a synergy such as we find in Mark’s prologue. The lifestyle confrontation that the good news brings is, indeed, good news for Earth and for all creation.”⁴⁷⁵ The Australian scholar argues that Mark’s prologue is about change, and therefore, is a future hope. Furthermore, he concludes,

Jesus’ vision of God’s reign remains at some points undefined in Mark’s gospel, but appears to take its origins in hopes for restoration of Israel, and, often connected with that, involves both the inclusion of all peoples and the renewal of all creation through the gift of the Spirit. While not identified as such in the prologue nor in Mark’s gospel, this hope includes more than humans beings and, when fully embraced, celebrates the restoration and renewal of the whole creation.⁴⁷⁶

Bauckham’s pioneering work and Loader’s study constitute a sound basis to further extend the study the gospel of Mark from a social ecology/ecojustice perspective.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 32.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 33.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 43.

Traditionally, Mark's symbol has been a lion. And Mark's belly is bottomless. It devours the readings that we throw to it, ripping their pages to shreds. No man, ox, or eagle feeds with such ferocity.

Stephen D. Moore⁴⁷⁷

Mark has written a remarkable Gospel...The story itself captivates the imagination and challenges the assumptions and lives of all who read and study it...he has produced a literary masterpiece.

Timothy J. Geddert⁴⁷⁸

Bauckham's reminder that the particular text of Mark he studies is to be read against the Jewish tradition,⁴⁷⁹ holds true for the whole gospel. The Gospel of Mark has indeed captured the limelight in New Testament scholarship during the last four decades. Today, most scholars agree that Mark was the earliest written of the four canonical gospels.⁴⁸⁰ Anderson and Moore eloquently trace the stony road of the history of how Mark--whoever he was--came to be recognized as a legitimate author in his own right. According to them, from the witness of Papias via Eusebius, through the Middle Ages and the Reformation, to the final decades of the twentieth century, Mark has been identified in diverse ways as a gospel writer: scribe, summarizer, the Holy Spirit's writing instrument, chronicler/ reporter, collector, theologian, etc.⁴⁸¹ But Anderson and Moore go beyond "Mark" and beyond the text itself. They want to reach the reader herself/himself. They argue that "prior to the creative engagement of

⁴⁷⁷ Moore, *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives: Jesus Begins to Write*, 5.

⁴⁷⁸ Timothy J. Geddert, *Watchwords: Mark 13 in Markan Eschatology*, (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 255.

⁴⁷⁹ Bauckham, "Jesus and the Wild Animals," 10.

⁴⁸⁰ In this dissertation, the hypothesis of Markan priority is assumed.

⁴⁸¹ Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, "Introduction: The Lives of Mark," ed. idem *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 1-21.

a reader who ‘activates’ it, the Bible, like any other text, remains a partial or unfinished object...Prior to the interpretative act, there is nothing definitive in the text to be discovered.”⁴⁸² What can the reader discover when she/he rereads the text in light of the ecological crisis? How does Mark deal with the relationship between humans and the more than human world?

In *The Comedy of Human Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*, Joseph Meeker writes that “Human beings are the earth’s only literary creatures... If the creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined critically and honestly to discover its influence upon human behavior and the natural environment....” He continues, and raises a question that remains critical to any literary work: “...from the unforgiving perspective of evolution and natural selection, does literature contribute more to our survival than it does to our extinction?”⁴⁸³ Can we approach Mark also with that question in mind? Can one subject this rather complex text to such scrutiny? In an era of ecological devastation, does it contribute to our survival or to our extinction?

The Gospel of Mark is a remarkable achievement as a piece of literature, as its writer “innovatively combined old and new elements into a new kind of story....”⁴⁸⁴ His greatness is even recognized by committed critics and skeptics.⁴⁸⁵ David Rhoads

⁴⁸² Ibid., 15.

⁴⁸³ As mentioned by Glen A. Love, “Revaluing Nature,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 228.

⁴⁸⁴ Richard Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark’s Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 22.

⁴⁸⁵ Just two examples suffice here. “Mark has written a remarkable Gospel... The story itself captivates the imagination and challenges the assumptions and lives of all who read and study it... he has produced a literary masterpiece...” These are the words of Timothy J. Geddert, *Watchwords: Mark 13 in Markan Eschatology*

observes that “[T]he author has not simply collected traditions, organized them, made connections between them, and added summaries; the author has told a story, a dramatic story, with characters whose lives we follow in the various places they travel and through the various events in which they are caught up.”⁴⁸⁶ In one of his studies on the gospel of Mark, U.S. scholar, Richard Horsley, argues that Mark is “a story about resistance to an ancient imperial order composed from within and for a movement among peoples subjected to that empire.”⁴⁸⁷ Elsewhere, Horsley locates Mark in the framework of a series of popular protests which he surveys. In his opinion, “[E]very one of the popular protests or movements against Roman imperial rule...was clearly rooted in the Israelite tradition of resistance to oppressive rule and was attempting to restore the traditional Israelite way of life that had been so severely disrupted and disordered by Roman imperialism.”⁴⁸⁸ Horsley argues that the Markan Jesus presented an alternative option to the Roman imperial (dis)order. In his view, what Jesus proclaimed was an integrated new proposal for renewal of the people of Israel, at all levels and for everyone, but particularly for the poor and the marginalized, the *ptôchoi*, in the language of the beatitudes (Matt 5:1-11; Luke 6:20-

(Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 255. In a similar vein, Earl Doherty argues that “Christianity owes its two-thousand year whirlwind career to the literary genius of Mark. Without Mark’s creation, Paul and the Christ cult on which he spent his life preaching would have vanished into the sunken pits of fossilized history...” Furthermore, and referring to the Gethsemane story, Doherty admits that “... there are many finely-wrought elements to this single scene, a piece of subtle crafting which places Mark in the ranks of the greatest writers of all time.” See Earl Doherty, *The Jesus Puzzle* (Ottawa: Canadian Humanistic Publication, 1999), 251.

⁴⁸⁶ David Rhoads, *Reading Mark: Engaging the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 4. Rhoads argues that “as originated in an oral culture, the Gospel of Mark was meant to be performed in its entirety before a listening/observing audience,” *Ibid.*, 177, and tells his experience as performer of Mark, “having done it nearly 200 times.” *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴⁸⁷ Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 22.

⁴⁸⁸ Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 45.

26). He claims that “[J]esus launched a mission not only to heal the debilitating effects of Roman military violence and economic exploitation, but also to revitalize and rebuild the people’ cultural spiritual and communal vitality...in his offering the kingdom of God to the poor, hungry, and despairing people, Jesus instilled hope in a seemingly hopeless situation.”⁴⁸⁹ Ched Myers, a US biblical scholar and activist, is of a similar conviction. Borrowing the expression from Amos Wilder, he believes that Mark is engaged in a “war of myths.”⁴⁹⁰ In his view, myth is “a kind of meaningful symbolic discourse within a given cultural and political system.”⁴⁹¹ Mark’s war, in his opinion, is a war against Roman imperialism, a war against the dominant social order. Moreover, Myers adds that “his [Mark’s] is a story by, about, and for those committed to God’s work for justice, compassion, and liberation in the world.”⁴⁹² The combination of findings of the studies of biblical scholars such as Bauckhman, coupled with insights from Horsley and Myers, constitute a sound and holistic approach, in which ecological questions are closely interrelated with sociopolitical and justice questions. Ecojustice and Social Ecology principles may shed further light on the texts.

⁴⁸⁹ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 126. Stephen Moore is much more cautious concerning this question. He observes that “Mark’s stance vis à vis Rome cannot plausibly be construed as one of unambiguous opposition.... Mark’s attitude toward Rome is imbued with that simultaneous attraction and repulsion--in a word, ambivalence—to which Homi Bhabba, in particular, has taught us to be attuned when analyzing colonial or anticolonial discourses.” See “Mark and Empire: ‘Zealot’ and ‘Postcolonial’ Readings,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2004), 141.

⁴⁹⁰ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 459.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, 11.

In this study of the gospel of Mark, I assume some of the hypotheses developed by recent scholars on the Gospel, such as R. Horsley, C. Myers, M. A. Tolbert, H. C. Waetjen and J. D. Crossan.⁴⁹³ It is assumed here that Mark's gospel was written soon after the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and that the *Sitz im Leben* of the community for which the gospel was produced was mainly a rural one, that of village communities in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, that is, Galilee and/or southern Syria.⁴⁹⁴ It is further assumed that the story presented is a narrative of the suppressed and subjected people, and that its principal conflict is between Jesus and the Jerusalem rulers and their representatives.⁴⁹⁵ Mark's *euangelion* opens up new avenues to understand the urgent message brought and proclaimed by Jesus: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (*hoti peplērōtai ho karios kai êngiken he basileia tou theou metanoete kai pisteuete en tō euangelīō*) (1:15).

⁴⁹³ Richard Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospe*; Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*; Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989); Herman C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989); John D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); and *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

⁴⁹⁴ There is no full agreement concerning the date of composition and the location of Mark. There is a tradition which posits Rome as the place of origin and suggests an earlier date for its composition (around 60 C.E.). See, for example, Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). Most scholars, however, now opt for a date of just before or after 70 C.E.

⁴⁹⁵ See Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 27-51, 85.

Major (ecological) themes in Mark: The Kingdom of God (*basileia tou theou*).

His [Jesus'] ideal group is, contrary to the Mediterranean and indeed most human familial reality, an open one equally accessible to all under God. It is the Kingdom of God, and it negates that terrible abuse of power that is power's dark specter and lethal shadow

John Dominic Crossan⁴⁹⁶

In the whole realm of New Testament hermeneutics there is no more intractable problem than that of the interpretation of the symbol "Kingdom of God" in the message of Jesus.

Norman Perrin⁴⁹⁷

The hermeneutics of the Kingdom of God consists especially in making the world a better place. Only in this way will I be able to discover what the Kingdom of God means.

Gustavo Gutierrez⁴⁹⁸

Mark starts his narrative using precisely the word, "gospel" (*archê tou euangeliou Iêsou Xristou*). The word, *euangelion*, "good news," was a relatively well-known expression in the Mediterranean world. It was used to announce the victories of the Roman legions as well as to salute the appointment of new emperors, and used

⁴⁹⁶ *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 1994), 60.

⁴⁹⁷ *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 15. If this writer were to accept literally Perrin's position, this dissertation would have to stop here. Nevertheless, I view this over forty years-old declaration more as a challenge to continue research and investigation than as a deterrent.

⁴⁹⁸ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation : History, Politics and Salvation*. Translated and edited by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), 13.

particularly in the imperial cult.⁴⁹⁹ Is it just a coincidence or it is used by the evangelist, intentionally, in a confrontational way, *vis à vis* the imperial use of the term?⁵⁰⁰ Can Mark's intentional beginning be seen as part of the "new utopian thinking and revolutionary dysfunctionality," as one of the ecojustice/Social Ecology principles states? Can we perceive from the beginning, that the writer develops a critical position and a radically different understanding of the "good news"? As far as the relationships and plausible interaction of Jesus' Kingdom (empire) with Rome, Brazilian poet and theologian, Ruben Alves, claims that the kingdom of God does not evidence "a belief in the possibility of a perfect society but rather the belief in the nonnecessity of *this* imperfect order."⁵⁰¹

After Jesus is baptized by John the Baptizer, he is driven out into the wilderness where he spends "forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the "wild animals"(1:13), as we have seen. The first words attributed to Jesus in the text are in Mark 1:15, where he proclaims (*kêryssôn*) that the Kingdom of God (*he basileia tou*

⁴⁹⁹ See Elliot C .Maloney, *Jesus' Urgent Message for Today: The Kingdom of God in Mark's Gospel* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), 46. See also Simon Samuel, "The Beginning of Mark: A Colonial/Postcolonial Conundrum," *Biblical Interpretation* 10 (2002): 405-419.

⁵⁰⁰ Indian scholar Simon Samuel provides a nuanced interpretation of the text. He argues that Mark's beginning "potentially would have created a complex mixture of impressions in the consciousness of the first century audience as it set (exchanged) the story of Jesus within the religious-cultural categories and codes of imperial Rome and of the first century Judaisms, and their images (and imaginations) of the 'messiahs' and 'sons of God.'" Ibid., 416. Samuel concludes his study claiming that Mark "appears to locate himself in an interstitial space to enunciate his voice that potentially disrupts both Roman colonial and the native Jewish nationalistic and collaborative discourse of power." "The Beginning of Mark:"418. See also, idem, *A Postcolonial Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2007), 87-107.

⁵⁰¹ Ruben Alves, "Christian Realism: Ideology of the Establishment," *Christianity and Crisis*, (September 17, 1973): 173f.

theou) is near, closer, or at hand (*ἐγγικεν*).⁵⁰² Actually, this first verbal proclamation announces Jesus' entire program.⁵⁰³

It is almost a truism to say that the Kingdom of God is the fundamental teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark,⁵⁰⁴ as it is in the rest of the synoptic gospels.⁵⁰⁵ Horsley calls it "the controlling metaphor of Mark's story."⁵⁰⁶ Elsewhere he also refers to the kingdom of God as "the overarching theme of Jesus' prophetic declaration..."⁵⁰⁷ For Borg, Jesus' declaration in 1:15 constitutes Mark's "thematic construction."⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰² It is important to note that mentions of Jesus in this dissertation do not refer to a hypothetical *historical* Jesus, but rather to the Markan Jesus, the main protagonist of the Markan narrative.

⁵⁰³ In a rather humorous way, Moore draws a pictorial description of this scene. One can perceive "visual echoes" of the 1966 remarkable movie, *L'Armata Brancaleone*, by Italian director, Mario Monicelli. Moore observes that "Mark's ragtag peasant protagonist proclaims..., marching through the remote rural reaches of southern Galilee and drawing assorted other peasant nonentities in his wake, fellow builders-to-be of this latest and greatest of empires." See Moore, "Mark and Empire," 144.

⁵⁰⁴ See Maloney, *Jesus' Urgent Message*, 45; Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), which traces the history of the modern development of the concept of the Kingdom of God since Schleiermacher (early nineteenth century) through the mid-twentieth century; and idem, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

⁵⁰⁵ The number of times the expression "Kingdom of God," is mentioned is in itself remarkable. *Basileia* is mentioned 124 times in the synoptic gospels (fifty five in Matthew, eighteen in Mark, and forty six in Luke), while it is only mentioned five times in John, and eight times in the Acts of the Apostles. In Mark, particularly, of the eighteen times, fourteen instances refer to the kingdom of God, and four to other kingdoms (3:24; 6:23; 11:10 and 13:8). Jesus is the speaker about kingdoms and the kingdom of God in all but three instances: Herod in 6:23; the crowd in 11:10 and the author in 15:43. For more details, see Burton Mack, "The Kingdom Sayings in Mark," *Forum* Vol.3, no.1 (1987): 3-47.

⁵⁰⁶ Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 18.

⁵⁰⁷ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 103.

⁵⁰⁸ Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, 194.

After the calling of the first two disciples (1:16-20), the subsequent stories can be described-- as Horsley claims—as “part of a larger program of social as well as personal healing.”⁵⁰⁹ The first narrative is Jesus’ first exorcism in Mark, and it is the confrontation with a man with an unclean spirit (*en pneumati akathartō*). The second is the healing of Simon’s mother in law which is immediately followed by the healing and casting out of demons of the many people brought to Jesus. Healings are indeed much more than psychosomatic improvements of the people that were cured or made whole again. They point to and are signs of a larger healing that has to do with the community, and with all other social, political, and economic and ecological spheres of life. They have to do with the wholeness of life. The kingdom of God made manifest and embodied in Jesus is in full motion. The first action of Jesus takes place in the Synagogue, the second inside Peter’s home. There seems to be no division here between what modern people would call “sacred” (the synagogue) and “profane” (a house). Healings and exorcisms are performed everywhere. Openly, in the public arena --as the healings of the leper (1:40-45) attests-- or inside the house, healing the paralyzed man (2:1-12). The story of the calming of the storm (Mark 4:35-41) opens up the “beyond the human” sphere, and again suggests that there are no realm that is not affected by the coming of this new kingdom. The kingdom is an organic process, and as such is set over against the process that characterizes the Roman Empire. The healing of the man possessed by the *Legion* (Mark 5:1-20)—a notable example of an anti-imperial(istic) narrative; the daughter of Jairus brought to life, and the cure of the woman suffering from hemorrhages (Mark 5:21-43); the feedings of the hungry (Mark 6:33-40 and Mark 8:1-10), and Jesus walking on the sea (Mark 6:52), are all narratives that can be read as examples of how the kingdom of God is present and

⁵⁰⁹ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 108.

coming in force into the world. The kingdom seems to embrace all aspects of reality and nothing is strange to its presence. It cuts across established boundaries and limits. What Jesus brings nearer is integral. It encompasses all realms and dimensions of life, and even challenges embedded religious convictions, as the Jesus of the story dares to heal also on the Sabbath day (2:21-31).

Murray Bookchin once described the task ahead for social ecologists as follows: “Guided as we may be by the principle of equality of unequals; we can ignore neither the personal arena nor the social, neither the domestic nor the public, in our prospect to achieve harmony in society and harmony with nature.”⁵¹⁰ This is one of the main goals of the ecological society. Evidently Bookchin was not referring to the *basileia tou theou*, but invites all concerned persons to be present and active protagonists in every realm of society.

Specifically, in the gospel of Mark, the kingdom of God is mentioned on the following occasions: 1:15, the announcement of Jesus, that is, the “program” and reason of his coming; 3:22-27, Jesus and Beelzebul, where through Jesus’ exorcisms the kingdom [of God] is implicit; 4:11, the secret given to the disciples and to the others in *parabolai*; 4:26-29, the parable of the seed that grows; 4:30, the parable of the mustard seed; 9:1, the kingdom comes with power; 9:47, better enter the kingdom maimed than thrown into hell; 10:14-15, children and the kingdom; 10: 23, wealth and the kingdom; 10:24, 25, difficulties in entering the kingdom; 11:10, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, the kingdom of David; 12:34, the scribe that was not far from the kingdom;

⁵¹⁰ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 340.

14:25, drink wine new in the kingdom; and 15:43, Joseph of Arimathea waiting for the kingdom.⁵¹¹

Moreover, one can say that besides Jesus' words and deeds, the kingdom can be seen in the way Jesus organized the people to be prepared for its coming and presence. Horsley argues about the important role that the "local village assemblies" (*sinagogai*) played as "networks of communication and cooperation."⁵¹² Horsley develops his argument to demonstrate the critical position of such organizations. He argues that "In Mark's story, Jesus and his disciples operated in the key social forms of peasant life, the household and village, and particularly in the principal social form of community communication and governance, the assembly."⁵¹³ If this is the case, there is an extraordinary correlation with the key concept of peoples' organization posited by social ecology, what is named as libertarian municipalism, which is the political philosophy of social ecology or the concrete political dimension of Communalism, as defined by Bookchin.⁵¹⁴ As spelled out in chapter two of this

⁵¹¹ For detailed studies on the Hebrew Bible background of the concept of the kingdom of God, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. 1986), and C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 21ff. Burton Mack, in turn, in his study "The Kingdom sayings in Mark," seems more skeptical, and points to studies that called into question that there was such a thing as a definite Jewish "messianic" expectation. Mack argues that the term *basileia tou theou* appears in only three instances in Hellenistic-Jewish literature outside early Christian texts, and that "each of the three refers to an order of things imagined with the help of the wisdom concept. None requires an apocalyptic drama for its manifestations" (14). These texts are *The Sentences of Sextus* (307-11), *the Wisdom of Solomon* (10:10), and in *Philo of Alexandria* (*De Specialibus Legibus* 4.164). He draws the following conclusion: "...[it] must be that the language of a 'kingdom' of God emerged mainly among Hellenistic-Jewish thinkers struggling with the question of social ethics" (16). Emphasis original.

⁵¹² Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 118.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵¹⁴ On this matter, see Janet Biehl and Murray Bookchin, *The Politics of Social Ecology: Libertarian Municipalism*.

dissertation, Communalism is understood as an approach to social life, one which is based on humanly-scaled, decentralized, and basically democratic communities... the *ethical* space for the good life.⁵¹⁵ Furthermore, the municipality is also described as “popular democratic assemblies based on neighborhoods, town and villages.”⁵¹⁶

Elsewhere, Horsley argues that Jesus

acted to heal the effects of empire and to summon people to rebuild their community life. In the conviction that the kingdom of God was at hand, he pressed a program of social revolution to reestablish just egalitarian and mutually supportive social-economic relations in the village communities that constituted the basis form of the people’s life.⁵¹⁷

It is to be noted that reestablishing just and egalitarian non hierarchical relations in society, and without domination is also the goal of the ecological society, a human construction in which human beings and nature can live in just and fair relations. One can see here the potential for an ecological vision of the kingdom of God. The challenge posed by this understanding begs the questions: Can one fully equate these two descriptions of societies and human organizations? Do they exist in tension with each other? Do they mutually challenge each another? And if so, how? Can one be a sign and anticipation of the other?

A particular interest for this study is the way in which Beasley-Murray describes some of the basic understandings of the kingdom. A clear ecological perspective is possible in his observation that “[T]he hope of Israel is not for a home in heaven but for the revelation of the glory of God in this world...the kingdom that

⁵¹⁵ Bookchin, “The Communalist Project”, 28.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁵¹⁷ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 105.

comes embraces this world and the cosmos and the ages of ages....”⁵¹⁸ This potential is more explicit in David Rhoads claims that “The Gospel of Mark portrays the arrival of the kingdom of God as a restoration not only of human creation but of all creation.... The arrival of the Kingdom of God restores human beings to their proper place and role in creation.”⁵¹⁹ Already in the so-called intertestamental literature, this idea is expressed in the *Testament of Moses* 10:1, 7-10: “Then his kingdom will appear throughout his whole creation.”

It has been noted that the word, *basileia*, is not easy to translate. Dodd, himself, admits that the English term “kingdom” “is somewhat ambiguous...”⁵²⁰ Others, such as Perrin, prefer to use the word “reign.”⁵²¹ As a person whose mother tongue is Spanish, and not English, I would like to make mine the words of Uruguayan scholar Mortimer Arias, when he mentions that

The term “kingdom” is an unfortunate one in today’s world: it is seriously questioned by many because of its monarchical political connotations and its associations with patriarchal structures and language. “Reign of God” has been suggested as a better alternative...Because I speak another language, I do not pretend to understand all of the nuances of the English language nor would I attempt to solve this sensitive issue. I would like, however, to share in this concern and to express my solidarity with those who feel discriminated against or oppressed by language.⁵²²

⁵¹⁸ Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 25.

⁵¹⁹ David Rhoads, “Reading the N.T. in the Environmental Age,” *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 24. June (1997): 259-266.

⁵²⁰ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 34.

⁵²¹ See Norman Perrin, *Parable and Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

⁵²² Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 16.

Whatever translation one may select--reign, realm, kin-dom (see below), etc.--there is no doubt that the symbol is framed in a strong hierarchical language. Despite its many egalitarian features, the language used conveys powerful notions embedded in a monarchical structure. Nevertheless, Andrew Ross' observation about language is valid when he claims that "terms are by no means guaranteed in their meanings, and...these meanings can be appropriated and redefined for different purposes, different contexts, and, more importantly, different causes."⁵²³ But there are limits to these possibilities here.

Among the theological currents that offer a critique of the concept of the "kingdom of God" and of its language, meaning and implications, a particular critical sensitivity is worth highlighting here: I am referring to the *mujerista*/ feminist discourse. Two examples from *Latinas* would suffice. Ada María Isasi-Díaz,⁵²⁴ a social ethicist and originator of *mujerista* theology, agrees that the Kingdom of God constitutes the key metaphor for Jesus' mission. Nevertheless, she states that this particular metaphor "has become irrelevant because the reality that grounds the metaphor, actual kingdoms, rarely exists any more."⁵²⁵ She goes on to say that such metaphors serve to reinforce once more the male image of God, and, as such, they are ineffective and dangerous, or even worse, they suggest "an elitist, hierarchical, patriarchal structure that makes possible and supports all sorts of systemic oppressions."⁵²⁶ For Isasi-Díaz, the new metaphor should rather be "kin-dom" of

⁵²³ Andrew Ross, ed. *The Politics of Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xi. Cited in Tat-Siong Benny Liew, *The Politics of Parousia: Reading Mark Inter(con)textually* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 1999), 17.

⁵²⁴ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 243-251.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

God, the “family of God.” She finds that this is a more personal metaphor that lies at the core of our daily lives. Interesting as it may be (see below exegesis of Mark 13 on the family), regrettably the play on words makes sense only in English, and it is not transferable to other languages.⁵²⁷

Argentinian theologian, Marcela Althaus-Reid, provides the second critique from this perspective.⁵²⁸ She goes even further and argues that while *basileia* has in Greek feminine implications,

it tends to obscure precisely what we do not like in the concept--theocratic notions, hegemonic threats, and values, which, although good in principle, come from the same colonial-heterosexual religious matrix we are trying to Queer, to make indecent and destabilize. To call Kingdom ‘Kingdom’ acts as a denunciation of the theocratic project of the New Testament at the same time as it highlights its commendable points; moreover, ‘Kingdom of God’ is a concept in conflict with itself, unstable and ambivalent, and perhaps we should not try to stabilize it.⁵²⁹

Furthermore, and in the context of discussing the idea of justice and equality, Althaus- Reid asks a series of poignant questions that deepen the critique: “Are ‘Kingdoms’ egalitarian projects? This lightness in our theological reflections betrays our inability to think of original concepts which can be rooted in real human experiences beyond the approved texts of the church and with strategic value for change.”⁵³⁰ Althaus-Reid seems to be in agreement with Bookchin, when he claims a need for deep, radical thinking and fundamental change.

⁵²⁷ Dorothee Soelle reminds her readers that English speaking feminists theologians have also attempted to talk about “queendom of God.” See *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 138.

⁵²⁸ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*

In a penetrating study of Mark from a postcolonial perspective, Stephen Moore adds his own particular understanding of the way Mark uses the word *basileia*, which he translates as *empire*. Moore claims that “Arguably, Mark’s deployment of the term *basileia* (‘empire’) may be deemed an instance of what postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak has dubbed *catachresis*, originally a Greek rhetorical figure denoting ‘misuse’ or ‘misapplication.’” Moore adds that, “As employed by Spivak, the term designates the process by which the colonized strategically appropriate and redeploy specific elements of colonial or imperial culture or ideology; as such, it is a practice of resistance through an act of usurpation.”⁵³¹

From different perspectives and having in common a deep concern for justice and equality, people and scholars alike continue to struggle with the meaning of the kingdom of God and its implications for a society and a world in crisis. In this context it is fitting also to mention a different way of looking at the issue, that of an eco-justice theologian, Walter Wink. He argues that

The gospel is the message of the coming of God’s domination-free order. Jesus’ teaching and being are at the core of Scripture, and Jesus is against domination. His preaching of the Reign of God is directed precisely at the overcoming of dominations. A critique of domination is, I believe, the tenor, or central theme, or gist, of the gospel.⁵³²

Ecojustice struggles for fairness and equality and Social Ecology’s strong criticism of any kind of domination and hierarchies find an appropriate echo here. Domination and hierarchy are made concrete at two levels: at the level of human to human relations—where people exploits people—and at the level of the relationships between human beings and the rest of creation, where nature is ruthlessly exploited

⁵³¹ Moore, “Mark and Empire,” 144.

⁵³² Wink, “Ecobible: The Bible and Ecojustice,” 467.

and misused. The kingdom, as presented in the parables, shows the crucial importance that the deep interrelationship between human beings and nature be based on justice, mutual enhancement, and profound respect. These relationships need to find adequate social and political channels, and social ecology offers specific proposals for such undertakings.

Furthermore, in the perception of the kingdom, the relationship between humans and the “more-than-human” is also highlighted by biblical scholars. A sample is provided by David Rhoads, when he claims that “The Gospel of Mark portrays the arrival of the kingdom of God as a restoration not only of human creation but of all creation.”⁵³³ In the kingdom, human beings keep their particular and rather special position. They are part and parcel of a realm where hierarchies are abolished (Mark 10:35-45; (see particularly the contraposition with “the rulers,” and “the great ones,” which are qualified as “tyrants” in verse 42) and where children are considered as examples and as those to whom the kingdom belongs (Mark 9:33-37; 10:14b). “Children”—in Horsley’s view—“pointedly reminds the hearers that the renewed village communities are for humble, ordinary people, in contrast to people of standing, wealth and power...”⁵³⁴

Salvadorian Jon Sobrino, in his article “Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology,”⁵³⁵ argues that as far as liberation theologians are concerned,

⁵³³ Rhoads, “Reading the N.T. in the Environmental Age,” 262.

⁵³⁴ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 122.

⁵³⁵ Jon Sobrino, “Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 350-388.

“the Reign of God is the most adequate reality for expressing liberation...”⁵³⁶

Studying the gospels, Sobrino states that “Jesus declares that, for God, life has priority over all else; he holds that, in today’s language, God is a God of life, and that therefore society ought to be organized in service of life.”⁵³⁷ This particular and forceful insight basically coincides with the fourth principle of social ecology/ecojustice: the need to struggle for the defense of life and of its integrity. This specific way of understanding the kingdom becomes critical in the light of the current ecological predicament.

Sobrino goes on to say that “Whether the Reign of God be called a political reality or a historical-social one, the important thing to bring out is the historical, concrete dimension it had in the mind of Jesus.”⁵³⁸ Furthermore, the Salvadorian theologian cites Juan Luis Segundo as follows: “The Reign comes to change the situation of the poor. To put an end to it...the Reign is theirs because of the inhuman nature of their situation as poor people.”⁵³⁹ Sobrino sharpens the point and claims that “The poor defines the Reign by what they are. They make concrete a utopia customarily formulated in the abstract...But for the purpose of formulating the termination of the misfortunes of the poor, words like *life*, *justice*, and *liberation* continue to be meaningful.”⁵⁴⁰ The writers of the other two synoptic gospels make the matter very clear, and call the poor, the destitute (*ptôchoi*) (Luke 6:20), the blessed ones (Matt.5:3).

Sobrino becomes the *porte parole* of many theologians when he claims that

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 352.

⁵³⁷ Ibid., 364.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 366.

⁵³⁹ Ibid., 369.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 369.

the theology of liberation, then, asserts that in order to grasp what the Reign of God is, not just any hope will suffice. Only the hope of the poor will do. The hope of the poor must, in some manner, be adopted as one's own. But once this has been accomplished, one also has a better systematic understanding of what the Reign of God ought to be: a promise of life in face of the anti-Reign."⁵⁴¹

Horsley, in turn, argues that the offering of the kingdom to the poor, "means sufficient food and cancellation of debts as well as mutual sharing and cooperation and personal healing."⁵⁴² Once again, the second principle of ecojustice/social ecology becomes relevant as it highlights a fundamental characteristic of the kingdom.

Moreover, and in agreement with Bookchin's way of describing social change towards the ecological society, Sobrino claims that "liberation theology emphasizes the historical and utopian aspect of the Reign."⁵⁴³ Both go hand in hand, thus, opening the way to concrete social, economic, ecological, and political actions of justice that would point to the higher justice embodied in the kingdom. Are these also the measures which signal the way toward an ecological society? Bookchin spoke about the need to think outside the box to confront the seriousness of the ecological and social crisis. He argued that "we can no longer afford to be unimaginative; we can no longer afford to do without utopian thinking. The crisis is too serious and the possibilities too sweeping to be resolved by customary modes of thought."⁵⁴⁴

Furthermore, such a utopia carries concrete features and characteristics: it creates political, economic, ecological, and social structures that lead toward the desired goal: the triumph of life in its fullness, overcoming current structures that are basically thanatofiliac. The principle of the interrelationships between economics,

⁵⁴¹ Sobrino, "Central Position of the Reign of God," 376.

⁵⁴² Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 79.

⁵⁴³ Ibid., 381.

⁵⁴⁴ Bookchin., *The Ecology of Freedom*, 41.

ecology, and politics, argues that the struggle for justice for the earth and all its inhabitants is pivotal in the process of building the ecological society. Perhaps it is in this context that one can better understand Horsley's claims that in Jesus' covenant renewal in Mark, or "the constructive aspect of the kingdom of God,"⁵⁴⁵ the question of "the egalitarian politics...matches the egalitarian economic dimension of the covenant renewal of Israelite village communities."⁵⁴⁶ Horsley calls it "a program of social revolution."⁵⁴⁷ Democratic political structures and organizations go shoulder to shoulder with the social responsibility for justice in all dimensions of life, both for humans and for all of creation. This implies a clear engagement, a commitment to embody and make present the promises of the coming kingdom.

Summarizing, James Nash is eloquent. He argues that

The good news of the coming Reign of God, however, is more than an announcement of our ultimate destiny; it is a definition of moral responsibility. We are summoned to shape the present on the model of God's New Heaven and New Earth. That is part of the meaning of the words in the Lord's Prayer: "Your Kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven.*" ⁵⁴⁸

Leonardo Boff agrees with Ricouer on the issue that the kingdom is never defined, and argues that "it modifies the reality of this world, so that the blind see, the

⁵⁴⁵ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 125.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁵⁴⁸ James Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 165.

lame walk, the dead are raised, the sins are pardoned. The poor, the afflicted, and those who have been denied justice are the primary beneficiaries.”⁵⁴⁹

In the kingdom announced by Mark’s Jesus, the whole creation, human and the more-than- human, actively participates in a relationship of justice and fairness. The ecological, social, and economic organization of the time, with its built-in injustices and structures of domination, is basically challenged and needs to be overcome. What is promoted by the Roman *basileia* is clearly in opposition to what Jesus announces. The values of the kingdom are community, equality, sharing, justice, service, humility, and self-giving. These are precisely dysfunctional to the values cherished by the dominating empire, as well as the values directly or indirectly promoted by the current competitive global capitalism.

The echoes of such a challenge still resound today. We live in societies structured in such a manner that a few privileged enjoy its benefits in detriment of the majority of the population. We are part of a system that exalts and incites consumerism, with its devastating social and ecological consequences. We are part of a society where humility and service are seen as values for the weak and feeble, and what it is posited is rather arrogance, dominance, power and control over others. What is required, then, to set signs of the kingdom? Rowland and Corner close their reflections with a challenge and a hope. They argue that “the hope for God’s Kingdom was often based on a negative rejection of the present order. But rejection of that order is always a ground for hope in a future that men and women are able to realize if they

⁵⁴⁹ Leonardo Boff, *The Lord’s Prayer: The Prayer of Integral Liberation* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 15.

are prepared to will the means of its realization.”⁵⁵⁰ Social Ecology’s poignant critique of the current socioeconomic system invites people to active participation in the building of a radically different order, in which just relations among humans and non-exploitative relations to nature are fundamental values to pursue. In this sense, it is fitting here to point out to Fernando Segovia’s understanding of what the kingdom brings and what it demands. He argues that

[T]he Kingdom called for a revolution within, a radical change in human ways of thinking and living in accordance with God’s plan of liberation. In addition, the kingdom called for a societal revolution, a similarly radical transformation in purpose and structure... Through these demands Jesus pointedly showed that the established order could not serve as a basis for the kingdom and set out to create the conditions necessary for the kingdom’s new order.⁵⁵¹

The Kingdom in parables

Basically, Jesus’ words, teachings, mainly *en parabolais* (4:2; 11; 33; 34), and deeds, developed this fundamental understanding of the kingdom of God. Particularly in the parables one can perceive a striking profusion of nature and nature metaphors when presenting Mark’s central theme. Contrary to what is found in the book of Revelation where the dominant metaphor is the city (see chapter five of this study), Mark has recourse to natural processes of the created world, and even creation itself is pitted over against the Roman Imperial (dis)order.

⁵⁵⁰ Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 197.

⁵⁵¹ Fernando Segovia, “Reading the Bible Ideologically: Socioeconomic Criticism,” in *To Each its Own Meaning*, ed. Steven McKenzie and Stephen Haynes, 299.

Parables are the main literary tool by which Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God in the Markan narrative. The kingdom of God is the ultimate referent of the parables of Jesus. The whole message of Jesus focuses on the kingdom of God, while the parables are today the major source for our knowledge of the main characteristics and values of the kingdom.⁵⁵² The parables, therefore, play a pivotal role in the teachings of Jesus about the kingdom.⁵⁵³

⁵⁵² Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, 1.

⁵⁵³ As far as the use of the parables is concerned, it is fitting here to be reminded that it took a little over than seventy years to put under serious scrutiny the traditional and rather strict distinction between parable and allegory as advanced by German biblical scholar, Adolf Juelicher, in his book, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*. See Matthew Black, "The Parables as Allegory," *BJRL* 42 (1960): 273-287. Norman Perrin traces a detailed development of the modern interpretation of the parables of Jesus, from Joachim Jeremias (1947) to the Society of Biblical Literature Parables Seminar of the middle 70's. See *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, 89-193. For many scholars, from the point of view of literary criticism, most of the parables are allegories. See the discussion in Craig L. Blomberg, "Interpreting the Parables of Jesus: Where Are We and Where Do We Go from Here?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991): 50-78. Blomberg argues that a valid approach is to recognize that "most of the major narrative parables of Jesus then fall roughly halfway in between the two poles of the spectrum. He reminds his readers that parables "...subvert the world, undermine conventional religion, and redefine the kingdom of God in terms of everydayness, vulnerability, indeterminacy, and the picaresque." *Ibid.*, 52. Scholars have dealt at length with the question. Burton Mack ("The Kingdom sayings in Mark") simply describes "*parabolē*" as a technical term in Greek meaning 'comparison'. He contends that as used by Greek authors, educators, rhetors, and the literate, a *parabole* served to clarify, not obfuscate. John D. Crossan, instead, presents a more complicated picture of the use of the parables. He argues in *Cliffs of Fall: Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), that parables are somehow made of glass. Some of them are the glass of windows whose clarity allows discovering of a world. But others are the glass of mirrors, resisting our attempts to turn them into windows and their reflective opacity reveals instead the faces of those who look upon them. Mary Ann Tolbert (*Sowing the Gospel*, 121-124, and 151-163) argues that one possible way to orient the listeners on specific aspects of the Gospel story is exemplified by one of the two longest parables told by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. It is the so-called parable of the sower, introduced in Mark 4:3-9, and further explained in 4:14-20. According to Tolbert, this parable speaks of four different ways in which people responded to Jesus' preaching. Shortly after the explanation, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to another sower, this time with better results, a text that has no parallels in the other synoptic gospels (4:26-29). Crossan (*Cliffs of Fall*, 26) argues that this particular parable is "a parable

The Markan Jesus uses examples taken from the world of nature, which bring clear ecological resonances. V. J. John notes that “Mark, despite having the least number of parables among the synoptic gospels, has the greatest number of nature related parables.”⁵⁵⁴ In the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-9, 14-20), for example, there is a close relationship between human beings and the earth. The sower (*ho speirôn*) is someone who is intimately related to and deeply dependent on the soil (*he gē*). There are the seeds, the very elements of the flora which contain the sustenance for the future, and the grain (*karpōs*), fruit of the combination of the human labor, the earth, the seeds, the sun, and the rain. This last element is explicitly absent in the narrative but implied in an ecological description of the natural circle of life, even in a relatively arid place such as ancient Palestine. In this complex, interrelated, and sometimes contradictory reality, even the thorns (*hai akanthai*) have the right to live. All the components of the ecological reality are mutually dependent. In the parable,

about the process of parabling, a metaphor for its own hermeneutical task, a narrative of its own interpretative destiny,” and adds that this particular parable “seems somewhat different from many of Jesus’ other parables. I would maintain, however, that this difference arises from the fact that it is not just a teaching about the kingdom, although it is that as well, but also a teaching about teaching the kingdom. It is not just a parable of the kingdom, although it is just as well, but rather as a metaparable, it is a parable about parables of the kingdom. As such, it tells about the parabler himself, about the parabled kingdom, and about the very parable itself as well.” Ibid., 49-50. Moore has words of caution concerning the use that Mark makes of the parables. He mentions the dialectical of “insiders/outside” in Mark and argues that “*Parabolai* in Mark are a partition, screen, or membrane designed to keep insiders on one side, outsiders on the other. Outsiders are those for whom ‘everything comes in parables,’ parables that they find incomprehensible (4:11-12). At the same time, *parabolai* are what rupture that membrane, render it permeable, infect the opposition with contradiction: those who should be on the inside find themselves repeatedly put out by Jesus’s parabolic words and deeds. Appointed to allow insiders in and to keep outsiders out, parables unexpectedly begin to threaten *everyone* with exclusion in Mark, even disciples seeking entry. Deranged doormen, parables threaten to make outsiders of us all.” See Stephen D. Moore, *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspective: Jesus Begins to Write* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 21.

⁵⁵⁴ V. J. John, “Ecology in the Parables: The Use of Nature Language in the Parables of the Synoptic Gospels,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 14 (2000): 307.

there are also the representatives of the fauna, the birds (*ta peteina*), uninvited guests which also receive their portion of food. There is also the celestial being, the sun (*ho hēlios*), both source of life and its continuous sustainer. Even the rocky ground (*petrôdes opou*) has the right to be part of the whole. Life, in all its force and splendor, bursts forth in this ecological parable.⁵⁵⁵ The result, the harvest, played a critical role in the economic life of the farmer and the community. It was used to feed the family, to reserve seeds for the next season, and to repay loans and taxes. Loans and taxes were part and parcel of the economic and political (dis)organization of ancient Mediterranean society. In extreme case of droughts and the ensuing failure in the harvest, peasants were forced to sell their land, if they possessed any, or even to sell themselves as slaves to be able to feed their families. The ancient Israelite tradition of the Jubilee (Leviticus 25, and Deuteronomy 15) is a reminder of the need to reestablish life and just relations between people, and between people and the earth.

Three Social Ecology/ecojustice principles clearly come to mind in reading this parable: the principle of life and the integrity of life (IV), the principle of interdependence between wholeness and diversity (I), and the principle of the interrelationships between economics, ecology and politics (III). John Clark argues with validity that Social Ecology “starts from the basic principle of unity in organic

⁵⁵⁵ It is fitting here to mention the article by Holmes Rolston, III, “Does nature need to be redeemed?,” *Zygon* 29, no. 2 (1994): 205-229. The scholar reminds his readers that “Biologists find nature spectacular, startling by any criteria. They also find nature stark and full of suffering, sometimes dreadful.” *Ibid.*, 207. In this penetrating article, Rolston assumes neither a romantic/naïve nor a pessimistic view of nature. Rather, he claims that “Nature is random, contingent, blind, disastrous, wasteful, indifferent, selfish, cruel, clumsy, ugly, struggling, full of suffering, and, ultimately, death? Yes, but this sees only the shadows, and there has to be light to cast shadows. Nature is orderly, prolific, efficient, selecting for adapted fit, exuberant, complex, diverse, regenerating life generation after generation.” *Ibid.*, 213.

diversity, and affirms that the well-being of the whole can only be achieved through the rich and the complex interaction of the parts.”⁵⁵⁶

In the parable of the kingdom that features the growing seed (Mark 4:26-29), the earth is described as the womb of life, a force that has the capacity to produce of itself (*automatê hê gê karpophorei*). While the different stages of natural growth are depicted, the sower is not fully aware of the mystery of life, he “does not know how” (*ouk oiden autos*). Humanity utterly depends upon the created nature, and there is in every seed a promise. In the kingdom parable of the mustard seed (*kokkô sinapeôs*) in Mark 4:30-32, again the diverse components of the ecological reality, the seeds, the earth, the birds, and the human, fully participate in the amazing development of life. John, the Indian theologian, comments: “The activity of nature in making a large plant from the smallest of the seeds invites one to ponder over the mystery of nature’s activities.”⁵⁵⁷

Mark resorts to nature again when Jesus, speaking once more in parables, tells the story popularly known as the parable of the wicked tenants, or of the vineyard (Mark 12:1-11). But this time, the conflicts, contradictions, greed, and disputes between human beings occupy the foreground of the narrative. These metaphors which are taken from everyday life are intentionally used so the hearers/readers are enabled to immediately connect with them. However, this does not mean that understanding the parables is taken for granted. On the contrary, Mark 4:11 seems to show that the purpose of using the parables is exactly the opposite. Even his disciples fail to understand them (*ouk oidate tên parabolên tautên*) (Mark 4: 13a). According

⁵⁵⁶ John Clark, “What is Social Ecology?,” 52.

⁵⁵⁷ V.J. John, “Ecology in the Parables: The Use of Nature Language in the Parables of the Synoptic Gospels,” 316.

to Perrin, the parables “are very powerful texts, and they are also texts offering a complex challenge to the interpreter at every level of the hermeneutical process.”⁵⁵⁸ Moreover, this is so because the parables “constantly shatter and probe, disturb and challenge...it is to this boundary [of human existence in the world] that one is constantly brought by the parables of Jesus.”⁵⁵⁹ Speaking about the kingdom in the parables, French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, claims that “Jesus nowhere says what the kingdom is. He limits himself to saying what it resembles. This is in itself very constructive... The symbol gives raise to thought; we might even say it compels us to reflect.”⁵⁶⁰

The parables refer to humans and to nature, and the way Jesus proclaimed the kingdom shows the interdependence between wholeness and diversity, in this program that proclaims justice and equality between people, and, by extension, between people and nature.

Non-human nature in Mark

Non-human nature features prominently in the different Markan narratives. From the first post-baptismal narrative, through stories such as the stilling of a great windstorm (*lailaps megalê anemou*) (Mark 4: 35-41); the healing of the Gerasene Demoniac (Mark 5: 1-20); the transfiguration (Mark 9:1-8); Jesus in Jerusalem (Mark 11:12-14); and particularly the seemingly ecocide of chapter 13,⁵⁶¹ all conveyed the rather critical role that the more-than-human world plays in Mark. Furthermore, nature is particularly present in a crucial moment of the narrative, at the crucifixion (Mark

⁵⁵⁸ Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, 201.

⁵⁵⁹ Perrin, 200.

⁵⁶⁰ Paul Ricoeur, “The Kingdom in the Parables of Jesus,” *Anglican Theological Review* 63, no. 2 (1981): 165-169. Here 166.

⁵⁶¹ On this particular passage, see the detailed study below.

15:33). The wilderness (*erêmos*) plays host to Jesus (Mark 1:12-13), the wind (*anemos*) strongly blows forming great waves (Mark 4:37), the great herd of swine on a hillside (*pros tō orei agelê choirôn megalê*) (Mark 5:11), the sea (*thalassa*) (Mark 5:13), the high mountain (*oros hypsêlon*) (Mark 9:2), the cloud (*nephelê*) (Mark 9:7; 13:26), the fig tree (*sykê*) (Mark 11:13; 11:28), earthquakes (*seismoi*) (Mark 13:8), the mountains (*orê*) (Mark 13:14), the field (*argos*) (Mark 13:16), the sun (*hêlios*) (Mark 13:24), the moon (*selênê*) (Mark 13:24), the stars (*asteres*) (Mark 13:25), and the heavens (*ouranoi*) (Mark 13:25) are respectively key protagonists in the different narratives. There is an abundance of the presence of the more-than-human in the Markan story that has not always received due attention by the scholars. Perhaps an exception can be found in studies related to the story of the crucifixion. There, even the sun departs from the scene: “When it was noon, darkness come over the whole land (*skotos egeneto eph holên tên gên*) (Mark 15:33). Ezra Gould claims that it was “a supernatural manifestation of the sympathy of nature with these events in the spiritual realm.”⁵⁶² David Fredrickson has, in turn, a particular and interesting ecological approach. He produces a large number of examples from Greek literature and art and comes to the conclusion that torn curtain of the Temple and the darkened sun can be seen to portray nature’s lament for Jesus. Fredrickson claims that “[T]he sun’s behaviour is an example of what literary critics, following John Ruskin, have called the pathetic fallacy—attribution of human emotions to aspects of nature.”⁵⁶³

⁵⁶² Ezra Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Mark* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1896), 294. Robert Gundry’s *Mark, A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 963-64, provides secular and religious backgrounds as explanations for this particular phenomenon. *Inter alia*, he cites Pliny, who said that the sun grew dark at the death of Julius Caesar.

⁵⁶³ David E. Fredrickson, “Nature’s Lament for Jesus,” *Word and World* 26 (2006): 40.

This is a compelling reflection. The crucifixion has a cosmic significance, and the rather strange behaviour of the heavenly body (*ho hēlios*) shows symbolically the universal dimension of the event and the solidarity between nature and humans. Susan Miller reflects on the Markan narrative from the perspective of the earth, interpreted as “a total ecosystem, the web of life”.⁵⁶⁴ Miller makes a survey of various scholars’ positions and concludes that the Earth “is depicted as an object that suffers the judgement of God on account of the actions of human beings. A hermeneutics of suspicion observes that Earth becomes an innocent recipient of God’s wrath.”⁵⁶⁵ Miller suggests an interpretative strategy which empathizes with earth and interprets darkness as “a response of the natural world to the opposition and mockery raised against Jesus. Darkness descends upon the land aligning the natural world with the suffering of Jesus.”⁵⁶⁶ According to Miller, only the earth mourns in the narrative.⁵⁶⁷ This reaction of the earth as subject is clearly attested in the Hebrew Bible in texts such as Jer. 4:27, 28; Hos. 4:3; Joel 1:10, 20, and in Hellenistic texts. Miller develops an interesting insight when she connects earth’s mourning with people other than Jesus. She claims that “earth responds in solidarity with oppressed and suffering human beings.”⁵⁶⁸ This perspective comes closer to an ecojustice and social ecology reading of the narrative, and goes beyond any anthropocentric understanding of the text.

⁵⁶⁴ Susan Miller, “The Descent of Darkness over the Land: Listening to the Voice of the Earth in Mark 15:33,” in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 123.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵⁶⁷ It is interesting to note that the Lukan account includes people mourning, notably women “beating their breasts and wailing from him” (Luke 23:27, 48).

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

But Mark is not alone in presenting this relationship between humans and nature/earth. Interestingly, the Gospel of Matthew adds another reaction of nature to the death of Jesus: “The earth shook, and the rocks were split” (*kai hê gê eseisthê, kai hai petrai eschisthêsan*) (Matt. 27:51). Eventually, texts considered apocryphal have also given some attention to the matter. For instance, in the *Anaphora* or Letter of Pilate to Caesar,⁵⁶⁹ one can find an interesting extension of the picture portrayed in the gospel. It reads “Now when he [Jesus] was crucified, there was darkness over all the world (*eph holên tên oikoumenên*), and the sun was obscured for half a day, and the stars appeared, but no lustre was seen in them; and the moon lost its brightness, as though tinged with blood....⁵⁷⁰ Not only the sun reacts, but also the moon and the stars are cosmic protagonists and have a sharing in the scene. Furthermore, at the resurrection, the heavenly bodies again are present, this time celebrating the event: “and when it was evening on the first day of the week, there came a sound from heaven, and the heaven became seven times more luminous than on all other days. And at the third hour of the night the sun appeared more luminous than it had ever shone, lighting up the whole hemisphere...And all that night the light ceased not shining.”⁵⁷¹ The heavenly bodies lead us back directly to Mark 13.

The Markan Apocalypse

⁵⁶⁹ The *Anaphora* is an apocryphal text likely from the seventh century. It is considered to be an elaboration of a more ancient document and extant in two Greek versions. See Aurelio de Santos Otero, *Los Evangelios Apócrifos* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1956), 471. The text shows a marked anti-Jewish perspective.

⁵⁷⁰ Section VII. See <http://sacred-texts.com/bib/lbob/lbob29.htm>. 3 February 2010.

⁵⁷¹ Section IX and X. Ibid.

Do not be alarmed! ...be alert! ...keep awake! These words do not come from a general alarm issued by government authorities to the general population after an ecological catastrophe, as it may appear. It is simple a compilation of words attributed to Jesus and excerpted from Mark 13. Moreover, the original Greek even echoes a certain pleasant rhyme: *mê throeisthe* (v.7)... *blepete* (v.9)... *grêgoreite* (v.35).

With these words, to what is the Markan Jesus referring? Is it to the end (*telos*) (v.7)? And if so, to the end of what? Does this apocalyptic imagery allow enough common ground for ecologists and people committed to the struggle for justice on the one hand, and to biblical scholars, on the other hand, to dialogue and offer mutual support? Is the text helpful to understand today's reasons to "beware"(13:5a; 13: 9a), to "be alert" (13:5a; 13:23) and to "keep awake" (Mark 13: 37)? Keith Dyer is convinced that from the perspective of the Earth, there are texts, such as Mark 13, that resist retrieval.⁵⁷²

I argue that this passage should be seen as an integral part of the Markan narrative, and cannot be treated in isolation, as some critics tend to do.⁵⁷³ Therefore, in the overall account of the story of the Markan Jesus, this passage is another way to call the community to perseverance and trust, to put their confidence in the words that "will not pass away" (*hoi de logoi mou ou pareleusontai*) (13:31b).

⁵⁷² Keith Dyer, "When is the End not the End? The Fate of Earth in Biblical Eschatology (Mark 13)," in *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, 44-56.

⁵⁷³ See particularly Hermann Detering, "The Synoptic Apocalypse (Mark 13): A Document from the Time of Bar Kochba," in *The Journal of Higher Criticism*, vol.7, No. 2 (2006): 161-210. As the title implies, Detering is of the opinion that Mark 13 has its origins at the time of the Bar Kochba (or Simon Ben Koshiva) uprising (132-135 A.C.E.).

God's creation--both human and the more than human-- are clearly present in different ways in this particular text. Relationships between human beings become hostile, divisive, and antagonistic (13:12-13), nature is inimical to people, with earthquakes (*seismoi*) and famines (*limoi*) (13:8), and the heavenly bodies (*ho hēlios, he selēnē, hoi asteres*) missing their purpose and falling into futility (13:24-25). Mary Ann Tolbert argues that "...any interpretation of a text, especially a text as traditionally powerful as the Bible, must be assessed not only on whatever its literary or historical merits may be but also on *its theological and ethical impact on the integrity and dignity of God's creation.*"⁵⁷⁴ In the light of her statement, what is the impact of Mark 13 on the integrity and dignity of all God's creation?

Mark 13 is the longest monologue in the gospel of Mark. In fact, this is only the second long sermon of Jesus in Mark. The first occurs in chapter 4 and it is mainly expressed in parables (*en parabolais*) (4:2; 33), and reference to it has been made already. In chapter 4, Jesus "got into a boat on the sea and sat there" (4:1); while in chapter 13, Jesus is said to have chosen to retire with a group of his disciples to the Mount of Olives (13:3). It is to be noted that on both occasions, the writer put Jesus in the surroundings of nature, in close relationship with the immediate environment, and both the sea and the mountain are his hosts.

The text is full of direct quotations of the Hebrew Bible or of allusions to it. C.S. Mann concludes that the text "reveals an abundance of O.T. allusions, quotations

⁵⁷⁴ "When Resistance Becomes Repression: Mark 13:9-27 and the Poetics of Location," in *Reading from This Place, Vol.2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, 331-346 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Emphasis mine.

and semiquotations... is so weighted by O.T. references... as to make all other chapters appear barren of O.T. allusions.”⁵⁷⁵

If there is any agreement among scholars concerning the Gospel of Mark, perhaps it is shared regarding the complex and difficult character of this particular chapter. When one reviews bibliographies in articles and books written on this passage, one has the experience of being overwhelmed by the sheer amount of scholarship devoted to these thirty-seven verses. One could well join the chorus in exclaiming *tot homines, quot sententiae!* Is it an “eschatological discourse”?⁵⁷⁶ It has also been called “a prophetic saying in a scholastic context,”⁵⁷⁷ Myers portrays the sermon as a parenetic discourse.⁵⁷⁸ Others prefer to call it “the little apocalypse” (by comparison with the book of Revelation), as do the fellows of the Jesus Seminar and a great number of their predecessors.⁵⁷⁹ Other scholars are of the opinion that the text does not fit at all in the modern (western) concept of apocalypticism, and it may even be considered antiapocalyptic. Horsley is among those who emphatically defend this later position.⁵⁸⁰ A more radical view is defended by Stephen Moore. In a convincing

⁵⁷⁵ C.S. Mann, *Mark*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co. 1986), 499.

⁵⁷⁶ See Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (United Bible Societies, 1982), 255, and Adela Yabro Collins, “The Apocalyptic Rhetoric of Mark 13 in Historical Context,” *Biblical Research* 41 (1996): 5-36.

⁵⁷⁷ “The Apocayptic Rhetoric”, 8.

⁵⁷⁸ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 324.

⁵⁷⁹ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 107. In *Jèsus Christ et les croyances messianiques de son temps* (Strasbbourg: Treuttel et Wurtz, 1864), Timothy Colani, a nineteenth century French scholar, developed the theory of the “little apocalypse.” He basically argues that “[W]e have ujnnder our eyes a short apocalypse by an unknown author, which the synoptic have taken for a discourse of Jesus and inserted into their compilations.” *Ibid.*, 17. According to the opinion of Beasley-Murray, it was the German scholar W. Weiffenbach who later popularized the little apocalypse theory.

⁵⁸⁰ See Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 122-129,135

article, Moore argues that “The anecdote of ‘The Widow’s Mites,’ then...would be the real site of apocalypse in Mark, not the so-called apocalyptic discourse that follows, rather lamely, on its heels, and for which it ostensibly prepares.”⁵⁸¹ Furthermore, Moore frames the text between two passages about women who are portrayed as playing role models of self-emptying and discipleship. Referring to Mark’s “sandwich” device, Moore claims that the text of Mark 13 is “[S]andwiched between two women of whom he [Mark, and perhaps Moore too?] is apparently in awe.”⁵⁸²

George Beasley-Murray, a British scholar who has worked on the text for about forty years, has simply called it “the Olivet discourse,” taking the clue from where Jesus is said to have sat to dialogue with a group of four of his disciples (*eis to horos ton elaion*) (13:4).⁵⁸³ Ched Myers calls this passage a “sermon on revolutionary patience.”⁵⁸⁴ Portuguese Fernando Belo, in turn, seeing that future tenses punctuate the entire discourse, calls it “an anticipatory narrative.”⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸¹ Moore, “Mark and Empire: ‘Zealot’ and ‘Postcolonial’ Readings,” 147.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵⁸³ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days: The Interpretation of the Olivet Discourse* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993). This massive text originated in Beasley-Murray’s dissertation written in 1952 entitled “The Eschatological Discourse of Mark 13, with Particular Reference to the Rise and Development of the Little Apocalypse Theory.” This dissertation was published under the title *Jesus and the Future* (London: Macmillan, 1954), subsequently updated and expanded in light of more recent scholarship, and published as *A Commentary on Mark Thirteen* (London: Macmillan, 1962). Beasley-Murray’s study provides a comprehensive overview of books and articles on Mark 13. Dozens of scholars’ opinions are reviewed and summarized. In the last two chapters of the book the author highlights many critical questions at stake. It is worth mentioning here that this historical-critical scholar essentially ignores the work of Fernando Belo.

⁵⁸⁴ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 324.

⁵⁸⁵ Fernando Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981), 196.

Roland Barthes reminds his readers that “ [A] text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.” ⁵⁸⁶ It is from this perspective that another French scholar looks at the text of Mark with the help of the work of the Italian Nobel laureate Umberto Eco.⁵⁸⁷ One of the main points that Schlumberger highlights is Eco’s understanding of the role that the reader plays in “completing” the text. Eco argues that the text is “a sluggish machine that delegates to the reader a part of its work.”⁵⁸⁸ As a reader of Mark, I would like to accept that delegation and I try also to wrestle with its meaning, to play with the text and if possible, add new sense and new challenges. As a reader, I would like to follow Mark’s own exhortation in the text, and try “to understand” it (*ho anaginôskôn noeitô*) (13:14b).

Tolbert claims that Mark invites his audience/readers to “recognize themselves as the persecuted followers of Jesus...”⁵⁸⁹ Moreover, she is convinced that, despite the writer’s ambivalence toward Rome (“one avoids offending too greatly those with real power to harm”), the text “ serves primarily as an encouragement to the faithful to resist all the terrors thrown at them by the colonial powers, and adds that it “ ...would have functioned as resistance literature against the colonial powers who controlled their economic, religious, and political destiny.”⁵⁹⁰ Tolbert argues that Mark 13 may be considered as “literature of resistance for the marginal, powerless outsiders who made up the earliest Christian groups,”⁵⁹¹ but is keenly aware than when used by those

⁵⁸⁶ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 148.

⁵⁸⁷ Sophie Schlumberger, “Appel aux lecteurs! (Lecture de Marc 13),” *Foi et Vie* 38 (September 1999): 87-96.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., 88. From Umberto Eco’s *Six promenades dans les bois du roman et d’allieurs*, (LGF-Livre de Poche, 1996), 69. English translation is mine.

⁵⁸⁹ Tolbert, “When Resistance Becomes Repression,” 334.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 336.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 338.

in power, it may become literature of repression for the dominant.⁵⁹² Similarly, Richard Horsley argues that “the historical background of Jesus’ speech in Mark 13, as of Mark’s story as a whole, was the sharp political-economic-religious conflict prevailing throughout early Roman times in Palestine.”⁵⁹³ In his opinion, the text of Mark fundamentally gives voice to subjected people.⁵⁹⁴ Similarly, Myers claims that “What is ideologically important...is the fact that he [Mark] chooses to appeal directly to a literary corpus that was *already* recognized by his readers as the tradition of political resistance under Hellenism.”⁵⁹⁵ I fully concur with these three complementary ways of reading the text which also reflects the main working hypothesis of this study.

As mentioned before, there seems to be a certain consensus in acknowledging that the immediate historical background to the writing of Mark is the Jewish-Roman war (66-70), which ended with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman forces under the command of Vespasian’s son, the general Titus, who later became emperor. This likely background is important for it helps to understand the point of view of the writer/narrator, who is speaking from the underside, from the perspective of those being harassed, invaded, and oppressed, from those who are being taken captive and massacred, both Jews and Jewish followers of the Jesus movement alike.

While taking the position of the oppressed, the writer equally warns the community not to be confused by the signs they see, that they do not fall into the

⁵⁹² See the examples given below about Spanish *conquistador*, Francisco Pizarro, in Latin America, and other similar cases.

⁵⁹³ Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 131.

⁵⁹⁴ See *ibid.*, particularly pages 44-51.

⁵⁹⁵ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 327.

temptation of believing that this was the moment promised by the (false) prophets (*pseudoprophētai*) for a full liberation (13:6, 21-22). Therefore, on many occasions, the word *blepete* appears in the text as a warning to the disciples and to all the hearers/readers (5a; 9b; 23a).

I would like also to note that at the end of his study, Beasley-Murray highlights very briefly the position of the early twentieth century scholar, H. D. Wentland, which is of particular interest for this study. According to Beasley-Murray, Wentland “drew attention to the double polarity contained in the idea of the consummation: it has to do with final salvation and final judgment on the one hand, and it is personal and cosmic-universal on the other,”⁵⁹⁶ a double polarity that can well be understood not as a mere dualism, but as being part of an integral wholeness. I want to emphasize this perception, as it is relevant for the kind of reading that I am trying to engage in this study. Human beings and the “more than human” form an inseparable reality, diverse and complex, interdependent, reciprocal, and, complementary --in Bookchin’s words-- “a dynamic unity in diversity.”⁵⁹⁷ The cosmic elements, the sun (*ho hēlios*) and the moon (*he selēnē*), the stars (*hoi asteres*), the powers in heaven (*hai dynameis hai en tois uranois*) (13:24-25) are also, in their own way, participants together with the human community (Jesus, the disciples, hearers and readers and their kin) of these dramatic moments. Even the mountains are present in the text. They are expected to become the hosts and receive those who flee from Judea (*eis ta orē*) (13:14b). If the Markan Jesus is preaching—as Myers argues—“a sermon on how to read ‘signs on earth’—a sermon on political discernment

⁵⁹⁶ Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days*, 376.

⁵⁹⁷ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 24.

directed at the historical moment,”⁵⁹⁸ the relevance of an ecosocial reading of the text becomes evident. How can one read the “signs on earth” today without taking into account the serious ecological and sociopolitical predicament of the world today, as sketched in the first chapter of this dissertation?

It is often mentioned that one important characteristic of an apocalypse or of an apocalyptic discourse is that the writer deals with the end (*to telos*) (v.7b) of time and in most cases, with the subsequent destruction of the world as we know it. Paradoxically, while also using similar imagery, social ecologists seem to be going in the opposite direction. While warning about the fact that human exploitation by humans and the ensuing reckless and irresponsible exploitation of nature has the potential to accelerate the destruction of the world as we know it, their efforts are geared toward its protection and conservation, that is, its “salvation.” Salvation is of this world and it is the salvation of the whole cosmos, humankind and otherkind. As referred to earlier, both find in the apocalyptic imagery a common ground on which to express their ideas and concerns. There is here an inherent tension between biblical apocalypticism and contemporary ecological awareness and engagement that cannot be underestimated.

The temple seems to have been the “excuse” used by Mark for Jesus’ disciples to open the conversation. The temple appears at the center of the speech, but it will quickly disappear. And this disappearance is not only physical, that is, “no one stone will be left here upon another” (*ou mē aphethē lithos epi lithon*) (v. 2b), but it is also textual, to the point that the temple is never again mentioned in the narrative, except for the mention that at Jesus’ death, the “curtain of the

⁵⁹⁸ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 330.

temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (15:38).⁵⁹⁹ The temple, however, is placed in a much wider framework, in a broader perspective, even a cosmic one. It is neither the center nor the end of all. Because all of what is being said is really a new beginning, “the beginning of the birthpangs” (*archê odinôn tauta*) (8c), when new life is born, when life’s cycle starts again with new strength and purpose. The Markan Jesus’ announcement that “no one stone will be left upon another, all will be thrown down” (*ou mē aphethē lithos epi lithon os ou mē katalythē*) (2b) is taken by most scholars as a *vaticinium ex eventu*, referring to the destruction of the city and of the Temple by the Roman forces led by Titus. Indeed it is more than that. It is one of the strongest polemics of Mark. It is against the religious and political elites who controlled the Temple of Jerusalem, their center of operations and of power. Horsley summarizes this position arguing that “[M]ark presents Jesus as spearheading this popular movement not as a politically innocuous religious revival, but in direct opposition to the rulers and ruling institutions.”⁶⁰⁰ The “ragtags” could hardly have identified with the “great tradition” which the Temple represented. Most likely they belonged to the “little tradition,” that of the mostly illiterate and impoverished peasants from the northern region of Galilee. According to William Herzog II, “the little tradition becomes a source and a resource for

⁵⁹⁹ See Josephus’ description of the Temple in *Antiquities* 15.11.7; 15.382-87 *et passim*, and *Against Apion* 28.103-109. Rhoads describes it briefly as follows: “This Temple was a huge complex that dominated the city. It housed more than two thousands priests at a time. During religious festivals, the Temple teemed with tens of thousands of Jews from all over the world.” See *Reading Mark*, 153.

⁶⁰⁰ Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 41. See also Moore, “Mark and Empire,” 138.

resisting the imposition of the great tradition by the ruling elites.”⁶⁰¹ It is said that nothing will be left of the Temple, perhaps an allusion that those who control the centralized power will be stripped of their positions and their fate will just be reduced to a line in history. In Revelation (see chapter five of this dissertation), the New Jerusalem has no temple, therefore, there will no longer be hierarchies nor domination by the elites. Social ecologists and ecojustice scholars, applying the fourth principle, would see the text as taking sides and privileging the poor.

From that point on, the text is almost a monologue of Jesus, inaugurated by a private question of (one of?) the four disciples “when he was sitting on the Mount of Olives” (v3), and briefly interrupted by the narrator himself with the

⁶⁰¹ William Herzog II, “Onstage and Offstage with Jesus of Nazareth: Public Transcripts, Hidden Transcripts, and Gospel Texts,” in *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul*. Semeia Studies 48, ed. Richard Horsley (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 43. See also Richard Horsley, “Submerged Biblical Histories and Imperial Biblical Studies,” in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah, 152-173 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). These studies take as their ground the findings of the already classical study of the peasantry made by James C. Scott. See particularly *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), and “Protest and Profanation: Agrarian Revolt and the Little Tradition, Part I and II,” in *Theory and Society*, Vol.4, No. 1 (Spring 1977): 1-38, 211-46. Scott highlights several aspects that deserve attention in this context, as they are particularly relevant for this study. He claims, *inter alia*, that “Implicit in the use of terms like little traditions and great traditions is the assumption that each represents a *distinct* pattern of belief and practice...the social ideology of patronage...gives concrete structural form to the cultural and political dependence of the little tradition while, at the same time, it serves to justify that dependence... religiously, of the peasantry of most societies is, nominally at least, of the same faith as the elite....Millennial dreams...provide another vehicle for radical religious and social values. Without exception, the utopia which is envisioned is a mirror image of existing social inequalities and privations—e.g. a bountiful world where there are no classes, private property or exploitation. Often the exiting ruling class must be brought down as a prelude to the new world. Historically, the mobilizing capacity of such millennial visions has perhaps provided the single most important normative basis for popular rebellions.” See “Protest and Profanation,” 9 *et passim*.

suggestion at the end of verse 14, “let the reader understand” (*ho anaginôskôn no eîthô*). The teaching of the prophet, Jesus, does not respond directly to the questions of the disciples. That is, they wanted to know when (*pote*) and by which sign (*sêmeion*) (v.4) would the temple be destroyed.

In vv. 7-8, Mark depicts Jesus responding to their question, describing a series of catastrophic events “wars and rumors of wars... there will be earthquakes (*seismoi*) in various places, there will be famines (*limoi*).” Perhaps Mark was referring to occurrences that he perceived as having a close relationship with historical happenings in the life of the people. There had been many wars since the time of the death of Herod (4 B.C.E.); and perhaps he especially had in mind the major Jewish-Roman war of 66-70. Horsley reminds his readers that “Famine was one of the results of wars for the peasantry.”⁶⁰² As usual, wars and so-called “natural” catastrophes take the greatest toll among the weakest and oppressed sectors of a population. By the same token, prolonged droughts may have been the cause of low yields and the ensuing famine for the peasants. The direct and interdependent relation of humans with the earth, is made clear here. Furthermore, the image of the uncontrollable forces of nature (*seismoi*) is also brought into the picture, widening the reach of such events. Earthquakes may turn out to be the voice of a despoiled mother earth speaking, as one of the principles of the *Earth Bible Project* suggests. Is the earth also crying and bleeding because of the persecutions inflicted against its wounded peoples? ⁶⁰³ Is the earth lifting up its voice against injustices? Is creation

⁶⁰² Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 132.

⁶⁰³ This chapter is being drafted soon after the terrible catastrophe that hit the Caribbean nation of Haiti. The earthquake and its ensuing shock waves caused more

groaning in labor pains (see the following chapter of this study)? The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor go together again and form an inseparable unity. Indeed earthquakes can also be seen from a different perspective. Rolston recalls the experience and reactions of Scottish-born John Muir, one of the first modern naturalists, confronted with the reality of an earthquake. Rolston says

In March 1872, John Muir was in Yosemite Valley when it was struck by the great Inyo earthquake. He records "I ran out my cabin, near the Sentinel Rock, both glad and frightening, shouting, 'A noble earthquake!... a terrible sublime and beautiful spectacle. It is delightful to be trotted and dumbled on our Mother's mountain knee.'" It was "as if God has touched the mountains with a muscled hand." Later, Muir concludes that the earthquake was "wild beauty-beauty making business. On the whole, by what at first sight seemed pure confusion and ruin, the landscapes were enriched; for gradually every talus, however big the boulders composing it, was covered with groves and gardens, and make a finely proportioned and ornamented base for the sheer cliffs. Storms of every sort, torrents, earthquakes, cataclysms, 'convulsions of nature,' etc., however mysterious and lawless at first sight they may seem, are only harmonious notes in the song of creation, varied expressions of God's love."⁶⁰⁴

It is to be noted that these Markan verses incorporate the traditional elements of the apocalyptic literature that represents the end of time or the coming of the day of the Lord. The prophet Jeremiah (particularly in chapters 50 and 51) speaks about the destruction of Babylon, and remarkably combines socio-political, natural, and even cosmic elements in the struggle against this historical oppressor of the Jewish people. Daniel chapter 11 can also be heard as an echo in this passage.

than two hundred and fifty thousand deaths. Large parts of the city of Port au Prince and surrounding areas were literally wiped away. The poor people are always those who suffer most in the so-called natural catastrophes. The areas where the small minority of rich Haitians live, such as Pétion Ville, for example--with luxury houses and constructions built to resist earthquakes--were spared.

⁶⁰⁴ Rolston, "Does nature need to be Redeemed?", 215.

The community/readers are confronting a difficult time (13:9). These times will not only affect them as individuals, but also will affect their families--their immediate family and their extended family, that is, the whole community-- and even whole nations will be affected, even the powerful ones, the empire itself. There seem to be an attempt to connect the different levels of social construction in this passage. Political persecutions will have the ability to threaten the disciples, to destroy the very tissue of the immediate nuclear family (13: 12), and even go beyond all that, as ripples that affect a wider sector of peoples (*ethnos ep' ethnos kai basileia epi basileian*), (13:8).

The persecutions will also take the people to the different levels of repression caused by the religious leadership (*eis synedria kai eis synagôgas*) and by the political leadership alike (*epi hêgemonôn kai basileôn*) (13: 9). Their life is threatened, and life in general is also threatened. Persecutions may become part of a committed discipleship, particularly when people are to speak to power, searching for justice and peace. There is abundance of examples in modern times. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., Archbishop Romero from El Salvador, and Azucena Villaflor de Vicenti, one of the founders of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, kidnapped and killed by the military dictatorship, are but just a few among the many other anonymous persons persecuted for the sake of justice. They belong to the "blessed" (*makarioi*), they are those who will inherit the promised kingdom (Matt.5:10).⁶⁰⁵

⁶⁰⁵ In this context one is immediately tempted to think of other paradigmatic persecuted people, and the name of Chico Mendez comes to mind. Chico Mendez was a rubber-tapper union leader in the Brazilian Amazonia. He organized families who peacefully opposed the clearing of forests and the indiscriminate toppling of trees. He

Horsley argues that “[I]n the speech about the future, he [Jesus] explains that his followers should expect unprecedented political conflict and brutally violent imperial repression followed by the final deliverance, and he exhorts them not to be deterred from aggressively witnessing to repressive rulers and faithfully developing their movement.”⁶⁰⁶

Is it possible to become partners rather than rulers, and as such to sustain a balanced and diverse Earth community? Bookchin responds with a strong call for the establishment of justice among humans, with an ecological perspective, because “what ultimately distinguishes an ecological outlook that is uniquely liberatory is the challenge it raises to conventional notions of hierarchy.”⁶⁰⁷ And this has to be hailed for what it is, that is *euangelion*, good news.

To euangelion appears again in v. 10. The good news must be announced to all nations. A Latin American scholar suggests that v. 10 should be considered critical to

saw in this destructive activity not only the threat for the forest and for its people, but also for the whole humankind, due to the important role that the rain forests play in the broader ecosystem. It was for him a clear question of justice: justice for the Earth and justice for its people. He wanted to preserve the forest and also to make it productive at the same time. He advocated the creation of “extractive reserves,” with no owners. From his perspective, the property would be shared by the whole community. This was a fatal intuition. For his actions, he was persecuted, and on Christmas Eve 1988, Chico was murdered with five shots. Through his martyrdom, he was a messenger of the good news, both for humans and for the more than human. Of him Leonardo Boff said “He departed from life in the Amazon to enter into universal history and into the collective unconscious of those who love our planet and its vast biodiversity.” See *Cry of the Earth Cry of the Poor*, 102. Another modern poet of the forest, Joao de Jesus Paes Lourdeiro, stated:

Ay! Amazon! Amazon!
They have buried Chico Mendez,
But hope just won't be buried.

Ibid., 102.

⁶⁰⁶ Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 129.

⁶⁰⁷ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 25.

understand Mark's view. In his opinion, the writer "pushes the *parousia* from the imminent future and inserts 'mission' as an imperative for the community."⁶⁰⁸

While fearing the traditional understandings of "mission," particularly when they were coupled with conquest and colonization of imperial powers, perhaps the idea can be salvaged. One may regard mission today as a responsibility for an integral witness and praxis of both the human and the "more than human" world, for the survival of life as a whole, particularly when life is seriously threatened. An "ecological" mission, where justice for oppressed human beings and the devastated earth can be announced as "good news" for all and as a hope for the future for all species, humans included.⁶⁰⁹

The history of missions is full of contradictions and ambivalences. I want to unveil here a particular historical understanding of mission that resulted in damage and a decimation of peoples and the earth. When political and economic power is exercised by centralized imperial(istic) systems and receives the "blessing" of religious authorities and texts, the compounding power of these two dimensions reinforce each other and have devastating results. A little over than 500 years ago, a "clash of civilizations" took place on this side of the Atlantic. A group of powerful men--guided by a particular understanding of a "religious" motive-- landed in what they decided later to call "America." U.S. historian Jered Diamond describes the first encounter between the Inca emperor, Atahualpa and the Spanish conqueror, Francisco

⁶⁰⁸ Osvaldo Vena, "La expectativa escatológica en el Evangelio de Marcos: Anàlisis literario y estructural de Marcos 13," *Revista Bíblica*, año 56 (1994: 85-101.

⁶⁰⁹ See the reflections of an inclusive understanding of the mission of the church by Deane-Drummond in *Eco-Theology*, particularly 179-80, and 227.

Pizarro, as “the most dramatic moment in subsequent European-Native American relations.”⁶¹⁰ The encounter took place in Cajamarca, on November 16, 1532. Pizarro and his troops captured Atahualpa, who was held prisoner for eight months. Pizarro promised to free him in exchange for a ransom in gold. In the meantime, additional troops gathered around Pizarro. The ransom was paid, and it was large enough as to fill “a room 22 feet long by 17 feet wide to a height of over 8 feet”⁶¹¹ But after it was delivered, Pizarro changed his mind and executed Atahualpa. The eyewitness report of that encounter, written –of course– by the victorious conquerors, is worth examining.

In the very name of the one who is said to announce these signs of the times as the “beginning of birthpangs” (*archai ôdinon*) (Mark 13:8b), they feel entitled to give God a helping hand and hasten the *telos*. I am citing specific fragments of the rather long account that Diamond includes in his ground-breaking book. The well-written story remarkably illustrates the mindset of the *basileia* and its religious foundation and justification. King of Kings? Lord of Lords? Let us hear the introduction:

... this narrative... it will be to the glory of God, because they have conquered and brought to our holy Catholic Faith so vast a number of heathens... Governor Pizarro wished to obtain intelligence from some

⁶¹⁰ Jered Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999), 67-68. More recent missionary encounters which also exemplify similar devastating tendencies are told by Homi Bhabha, in “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817,” in *The Location of Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 145-174, about English missionary work in India; and Mary Ann Tolbert, who in turn describes modern fundamentalist American missions in “When Resistance Becomes Repression: Mark 13:9-27 and the poetics of Location,” 337-338. Both examples are also related to the use of the Bible by those in dominant/powerful positions.

⁶¹¹ Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, 68.

Indians ..., so he had them tortured. They confessed that they have heard that Atahualpa was waiting for the Governor at Cajamarca.... On the next morning a messenger from Atahualpa arrived, and the Governor said to him: "Tell your lord to come... I will receive him as a friend and brother. I pray that he may come quickly, for I desire to see him. No harm or insult will befall him..." Governor Pizarro now sent Friar Vicente de Valverde... to require Atahualpa in the name of God and of the King of Spain that Atahualpa subject himself to the law of our Lord Jesus Christ and to the service of His Majesty the King of Spain. Advancing with a cross in one hand and the Bible in the other hand, ... "What I teach is that which God says to us in this Book. Therefore, on the part of God and of the Christians, I beseech you to be their friend, for such is God's will, and it will be for your good."... The Friar returned to Pizarro, shouting, 'Come out! Come out, Christians! Come at these enemy dogs who reject the things of God. That tyrant has thrown my book of holy law to the ground!... March out against him, for I absolve you!'... the armored Spanish troops, both cavalry and infantry, sallied forth out of their hiding places straight into the mass of unarmed Indians crowding the square, giving the Spanish battle cry, "Santiago!"⁶¹²

...The Spaniards fell upon them and began to cut them to pieces... It was by the grace of God, which is great. We have to conquer this land... that all may come to the knowledge of God and of His Holy Catholic Faith;...and by reason of our good mission, God, the Creator of heaven and earth and all things in them, permits this, in order that you may know Him and come out from the bestial and diabolical life that you lead...⁶¹³

The mission of the conquistadores was for the indigenous peoples an anti-*euangelion*. Bad news for the people and for the earth, as it was mercilessly plundered for centuries. "Brother will betray brother to death" (13:12a). "For nation will rise against nations and kingdom against kingdom" (Mark 13:8a).

In Mark's story, Jesus's followers were threatened with persecution. This is the reason for the emphatic *blepete*. The breakdown of relations between people, and between people and nature, seems also to involve the breakdown of one of the more

⁶¹² Santiago is the Spanish translation of James. Santiago is also called *Santiago Matamoros*, that is, James, the one who kills the Moors. Santiago de Compostela, the Galician city known to be the site of pilgrimage for thousands of pilgrims every year since the Middle Ages, is named after Saint James.

⁶¹³ Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, 69-72.

intimate levels of relations: the family. In whatever way the family may be conceived, it stands for fundamental affective, intimate, and supportive relations. Is the writer recalling the rather familiar passage of the prophet Micah (7:6) here? The breakdown is of such magnitude that involves betrayal even to death. Already, the Markan Jesus had made references to the family, to his own and to the disciples', and they do not precisely seem to affirm the traditional western understanding of the family. But the saying here seems to radicalize the Markan Jesus even more. Although he upholds the "commandment of God" (*tên entolên tou theou*) (7:8) and reminds the Pharisees and the scribes that "Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father and mother must surely die'" (7:10), the way Jesus enacts the Law seems to be different. When members of his immediate family, "his mother and his brothers" (*hê mêtēr autou kai hoi adelphoi autou*) (3:31) came looking for him, Jesus' response opens up the boundaries of familiar kinship and includes in it "whoever does the will of God" (*hos an poiêsê to thelêma tou theou*) (3:35). Elsewhere, in response to Peter's anxiety, Jesus enlarges the immediate family into a large community of people who, paradoxically, have left the immediate kinfolk and joined the movement. "Truly I tell you (*amen legô humin*), there is no one who has left house or brothers and sisters or mother or father (*hê adelphous hê adelphas ê mêtêra ê patera*) or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news (*tou euangelion*) who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age..." (10:29-30a). Let the reader understand! And note that the promise is that they will receive a hundredfold of everything they have left, except the father. Is this a proto-Freudian statement, or is it because the Markan Jesus is against hierarchy and domination, or is it because God is the only Father? If one reads only the gospel of Mark, one does not know who Jesus' father was, or whether he had one at all.

Regardless of the situation, the teaching is challenging for those who dared to leave everything and follow the ragtag. Parricide is announced. Parricide, unless in extreme and radical situations of painful and inevitable death, that is, in situations warranting euthanasia, is a culturally non-accepted, unnatural act that even nature rejects. Yet, here we have Jesus, announcing that it will take place anyway. Is this an apocalyptic, prophetic discourse, or the speech of someone close to madness? Is this the greatest of all abominations? Or is there a clear reference to divisions in the families of the community prompted by different understandings about what to do concretely at the time of the war--as Myers suggests?⁶¹⁴

Mark refers to the “desolating sacrilege” (*bdelygma tês erêmōseōs*), or to the “abomination of desolation,” as the King James Version prefers (v14). This key expression finds different English translations.⁶¹⁵ Perhaps this saying was well-known to Mark’s readers/hearers. It may immediately refer to the book of Daniel (Dan.9:27, 11:31; 12:11), the most explicitly anti- imperial(istic) text of the Tanakh, and 1 Macc. 1:54, a text that recounts the liberation struggles of the Jews. Historical-critical scholars have attempted to find the specific historical reference of the “abomination of desolation.” Most scholars agree that it is a reference to the setting of a pagan altar and erecting an image of

⁶¹⁴ Myers adds: “During the war, suspected rebels were routinely executed by Rome, and suspected collaborators by the Zealots... The community is to take its stand against both the rebel restorationists and the Roman invaders.” Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 334, 338.

⁶¹⁵ While the New English Bible agrees with the King James Version rendering the phrase “the abomination of desolation”, the New International Version translates it as “the abomination that causes desolation.” The Jerusalem Bible has “the disastrous abomination”; the New Oxford Annotated Bible, as well as the New Revised Standard Version, renders it “the desolating sacrilege.” Finally, the Good News Bible awkwardly translates the expression as “the awful horror.”

Zeus in his own likeness in the Temple of Jerusalem by the Hellenistic ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, between 167-164 B.C.E. Is Mark referring to this event or to more recent situations also known to his readers/hearers?

Scholars have advanced several hypotheses. Some have indicated that it refers to the emperor Gaius Caligula to have its image placed in the Temple; others, to Pilate's setting of Roman standards there; others to Nero; others to the zealot, Eleazar, son of Simon, who made the Temple his headquarters.⁶¹⁶ W. A. Such joins many others in claiming that Mark is making an explicit reference to Titus, the Roman commander, son of the emperor Vespasian, and that "it indicates Jerusalem's destruction so signaling the beginning of the end-time."⁶¹⁷ Beasley-Murray also sees the Romans in this passage: "Another long-established interpretation of the abomination in Mark 13:14 is its identification with the desolating and destructive Roman forces... I do see the association with the Roman army and its idolatrous ensigns as significant."⁶¹⁸ This seems also to be the opinion of one of the first commentators of Mark, the writer of the Gospel of Luke and Acts. Luke comments on Mark's text as follows: "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then, know that its desolation (*hê erēmôsis autês*) has come near" (Luke 21:20). For Belo, the capture of Jerusalem is the desolation while the burning of the Temple is the abomination, and claims that "for a Jew, their desolation is the worst of

⁶¹⁶ For an overview of the positions, see the Ph D dissertation of W. A. Such, published under the title *The Abomination of Desolation in the Gospel of Mark: Its Historical Reference in Mark 13:4 and its Impact in the Gospel* (Lanham/New York/Oxford: University Press of America Inc., 1999), and Desmond Ford, *The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology* (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1979), particularly pages 158-170.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁶¹⁸ Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days*, 415.

catastrophes according to the Jewish codes.”⁶¹⁹

Chilean biblical scholar, Dagoberto Ramirez, follows this lead and understands its implications: “At the politico-ideological level, the abomination of desolation reflects the brutal violence of the dominant system.... this domination subjugates the people and affects the whole community.”⁶²⁰ Rome--symbol of the centralized political and economic power *par excellence*--exercised control and dominated its provinces, imposing upon the vast majority of the people heavy taxes as well as its own cultural and religious demands. This was done particularly through its local sycophantic religious and political oligarchies. The domination, indeed, affected the whole community, as Ramirez observes, but it went beyond it. It definitely affected the more than human as well. Maurice Godelier, echoing Bookchin, observes that “[E]verywhere appears a close link between the way nature is used and the way humans are used.”⁶²¹ Further details are spelled out in the study of Revelation, chapter five of this dissertation.

But even in extreme situations, nature may be of help. The mountains are the place where people are invited to flee. But can the mountains become a place for protection and salvation for the persecuted people? The terrorizing practice of the oppressive colonial forces obliges people, particularly vulnerable people, “those who are pregnant and those who are nursing infants...,” to become strangers in their own land (v.17). Forced migration is the fate of many among the poorest of the poor. Be it

⁶¹⁹ Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark*, 198. This is so, because the Temple connected the heavens with the earth, and as such it was considered the center of the world. See *ibid.*, 78.

⁶²⁰ Dagoberto F. Ramirez, “Compromiso y Perseverancia: Estudio sobre Marcos 13.” *Revista de Investigación Bíblica Latinoamericana (RIBLA)*, 7 (1990): 86.

⁶²¹ *L’Idéal et le réel*, Cited in Deléage, *Historia de la Ecología*, 283.

by natural catastrophes--which affects mainly the poor—or by man-made terror and oppression, the “wretched of the earth” must abandon their lands. Economic migration is one of the main reasons for displaced people all over the world, as it was in the Mediterranean world of the first century B.C.E. Is this fragment a veiled reference to Lot before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, “Flee for your life; and do not look back or stop anywhere in the plain, flee to the hills...” (Gen. 19:17)? In any case, the abomination of desolation produces the forced disbanding of the people, as they become strangers in their own land, alienated from the land and from one another.

Horsley states that from vs. 24-27, “the speech shifts into vague language derived from prophetic traditions that cannot refer to already known historical events.”

⁶²² However, this is precisely the moment when the writer opens up another dimension of the full interconnected reality: the cosmic dimension. After that suffering (*thlipsis*), the sun will also suffer in its own way, that is, against its very essence and *raison d’etre* (*ho hēlios skotisthēsetai*). The moon will suffer an identical fate (*ē selēnē ou dōsei to psengos autēs*), and the stars, too, will disappear, causing incalculable damage and destruction (*hoi asteres esostai ek tou ouranou*). The way of describing the cosmic elements and their fate is part of the language of theophany in the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps the immediate reference is to the day of the Lord, as in Isaiah 12:6, 10. The drama goes beyond mother Earth. The celestial elements also have their role to play in this impending catastrophe. Ben Witherington, III, comments that “There may also be something of the notion found in Rom. 8 which suggests that the fate of creation is bound up with the fate of humankind.”⁶²³ Evidently so, as both elements of the equation are closely interconnected and

⁶²² Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 134.

⁶²³ Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 347.

humankind is totally dependent of the rest of creation (see more on chapter four of this study). The fate of creation as a whole is bound up with the fate of humankind, because humans are an integral part of creation, and are nothing when separated from it.

A problem still remains, however. Is Mark talking about a seemingly divine destruction of the earth, an ecocide? Or are the heavenly bodies in such a deep solidarity with humans that they also participate in human affliction and loss of meaning? Is this just “collateral damage,” to use a preferred and disgraceful military expression? A second look is needed to perceive a more nuanced interpretation.

These signs do not necessary announce the destruction of the earth and of its people. On the contrary, they are the prelude to seeing the super-powerful (*meta dynamêôs pollês kai doxês*) Son of Man, or of humanity (*ton huion tou antrôpou*) (v. 26). The coming of the Son of Man has as its consequence the gathering of all people. It is precisely the opposite result of what is produced by the presence of the “abomination of desolation.” The latter disbands, the former gathers together. The presence of the desecrators, that is, the armies of the empire, make heaven and earth mourn and people scattered or be in deep conflict. People are broken and disbanded, nevertheless they will be able to see (*opsontai*)⁶²⁴ and be made whole again. This gathering is also cosmic: “from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the end of heavens.” (v.27). Now the cosmic elements seem to be in harmony with humankind. Earlier, while they have lost their purpose, they were a threatening reality for people. Now, they have gathered together with humans, in a deep ecological embrace which is forward looking and produces hope and bears fruit.

⁶²⁴ A play of verbs when used closed to *blepo*.

The fruit of the fig tree is another image of nature that is brought again into the text. This time, it plays the role of a teacher. A prophet-teacher, Jesus, refers to a nature-teacher, the fig tree (*sykê*), allowing it to continue its pedagogical session. Earlier in the text a (barren) fig tree is the victim of a curse by Jesus (11: 12-14; 20-21). Mark 13:1-27 is found “sandwiched” between two fragments, i.e. Mark 11:12-14 on one side and Mark 13:28-30 on the other. The fig tree plays the role of the bread in this sandwich.

In 11:12-24, one could be justified in asking how can Jesus expect fruits if the fig tree was out of season (*ho gar kairos ouk ên sykôn*).⁶²⁵ Jesus seems to lack patience here. Was he not following the advice of the sages about the Law?: “As with the fig-tree, the more one searches for it, the more figs one can find in it, so it is with the words of the Torah; the more one studies them, the more relish he finds in them.”⁶²⁶ It is interesting to note that the word *kairos* recurs here. It was a key word that the evangelist used at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry: “the time is fulfilled” (*peplêrôtai ho kairos*) (1:15a).

The fig tree in chapter 13, however, through its own growth and development, is able to send the disciples messages beyond what they can see with their eyes. Mark insists, using the verb *ginôskein* twice in these two verses. They need to learn from nature, from the fig tree and the summer. There seems to be a close relationship between the image of the fig tree and the temple. William Telford argues that “By

⁶²⁵ Luke seems to have a more benign understanding, as with his reference to the parable of the fig tree. From his perspective, despite the fact that it had no fruit at the time, a new chance is given to it. See Luke 13:6-9.

⁶²⁶ B. 'Erub. 54a-54b. Cited in William R. Telford, *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree: A Redaction-critical Analysis of the Cursing of the Fig-Tree Pericope in Mark's Gospel and its Relation to the Cleansing of the Temple Tradition*, JSNT Supplement Series 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1980), x.

sandwiching his story on either side of the cleansing account, Mark indicates that he wishes the fate of the unfruitful tree to be seen as a proleptic sign prefiguring the destruction of the Temple cult.”⁶²⁷ W. A. Such is of a similar opinion. He argues that “The withering of the fig-tree stands for the disqualification of Israel’s leaders/rejection of temple.”⁶²⁸ Speaking of the relationship between the fig tree and the temple, Waetjen describes it as follows:

the fig tree symbolizes and conveys the finality of its rejection. There is no hope for renewal or revitalization, for the roots are dead; and it is only a matter of time before the rest of the tree reveals this terminal condition. That is, the desiccation of the temple, dead at its roots, even though it continues to show life in its continued operation, will eventually be manifested as obviously as it has been in the withering of the fig tree.⁶²⁹

As mentioned earlier, the destruction of the temple signified the end of the centralized religious elitism and of the religious exploitation of the people. Also, it represented the end of the despised priestly aristocracy, whose interest objectively coincided with the interest of the Roman invaders. The great tradition is doomed to fail. Mark’s call for the renewal movement among the Jewish people under the new leadership of the ragtag prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, finds a high moment in this chapter.⁶³⁰ Myers dares to go even further. In a challenging remark, he claims that “the ‘parable of fig tree,’

⁶²⁷ Telford, 238.

⁶²⁸ Such, *The Abomination of Desolation*, 34.

⁶²⁹ *A Reordering of Power*, 184.

⁶³⁰ Moore is of a different view, when he argues that “Mark’s apocalyptic discourse does not, however, portend the end of the Roman imperial order, but rather its apotheosis,” and suggests that to discover a counter-imperial apocalypse in Mark, one has to look to the threshold of this chapter, the story of the “Widow’s Mites.” See “Mark and Empire”, 146.

including Jesus' temple action, was his litmus test of commitment to a genuinely new social order."⁶³¹

"Let the reader understand" (14b), writes Mark. With such words, Mark invites the hearers/readers to use their senses (after all, *blepo* means "to see") but, at the same time, to go beyond them, to enter into a process of discernment and understanding.⁶³² Thomas Friedman tells the story of the environmental pioneer Amory Lovins, who, when asked "What is the single most important thing an environmentalist can do today?" responded with two words: "Pay attention".⁶³³

Discernment and understanding represent a tall order. The hearers/readers, need to go beyond short-sightedness and limited perceptions. One of them, perhaps, is the one that perceive humans as the only creatures with value and as the center and purpose of everything that exists. Mark invites all-- "and what I said to you, I say to all" (v.37)--to go beyond trodden paths that install hierarchies among people, due to racial, sexual, age, or class prejudices.⁶³⁴ It is a call to strive for a just, non-oppressive, participatory, and peaceful order, where people and the whole earth community can enjoy liberation and fullness. Social ecology and ecojustice contribute toward this end. In that sense, Mark's repeated *blepete* constitutes a helpful and welcome

⁶³¹ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 353.

⁶³² It is worth noting here the interesting analysis made by Geddert, *Watchwords: Mark 13 in Markan Eschatology*, 81-87. The author takes stock of the Markan use of the verb *blepo* in eight different passages of his gospel (8:15; 4:12; 8:23-24; 4:24; 12:38; 12:14 and 5:31). Geddert concludes that the evangelist uses it as a kind of *terminus technicus*, "...in a effort to warn against lack of perception, and as a call to discern that which is real behind surface appearances." Ibid., 84.

⁶³³ Friedman, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, 316.

⁶³⁴ For Myers, after having spoken about Mark's radical criticism of the political and structural problems, argues that these words signify "a call to nonviolent resistance to the powers." Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 343.

encouragement. It inspires people and may help to rekindle their creativity and commitment for the defense of life, thus expressing the deep hope that the coming of the human (13:26) inspires. If the wilderness is the vestibule of hope in Mark, the ecological mission of proclamation of the good news for the earth and its peoples is the arena of its realization.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE GROANING OF CREATION IN THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS

It has often been missed and has always had to be rediscovered that the Word of God in its ultimate and decisive forms in the New Testament has a “cosmic” character to the extent that its message of salvation relates to the man [sic] who is rooted in the cosmos, who is lost and ruined with the cosmos, and who is found and renewed by his [sic] Creator at the heart of the cosmos.

Karl Barth,⁶³⁵

Introduction

Critical Pauline scholarship traditionally divides Paul’s writings into the “undisputed letters,” and the rest. The consensus includes seven among the former group, Romans being one of them.⁶³⁶ Paul, a “radical Jew”, in the words of a well-known Talmudist,⁶³⁷ transformed both the character and the meaning of the multiple and incipient movements gathered around the name and person of Jesus. These communities (*ekklēsiai*) --according to Burton Mack--“became a network of social units, destined later to challenge the

⁶³⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol. III, *The Doctrine of Creation*. Part II. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 4.

⁶³⁶ The others are: I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, I Thessalonians and Philemon (though certain passages within them are debated as to their authenticity). The rest are considered as “deutero-Pauline,” or simply Pauline pseudoepigrapha. See and Morna Hooker, *Paul: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 24-27. Crossan and Reid choose to call the deutero-Pauline letters “post-Pauline,” or “para-Pauline,” and even “anti-Pauline.” John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reid, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus’ Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Kingdom* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 106.

⁶³⁷ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

Roman order.”⁶³⁸ Concerning Paul and his influence throughout western history Stephen Westerholm argues that “Two thousand years later, Paul attracts more attention than any other figure but one.”⁶³⁹ He goes on to say that “within the academy, anthropological readings [of the Pauline letters] ... are heaped upon feminist which are heaped upon historical which are heaped upon liberationist or Marxist which are heaped upon psychological which are heaped upon rhetorical which are heaped upon sociological which are heaped upon theological.”⁶⁴⁰ Following him, one is tempted to ask if there is still a place for a *socioecological/ ecojustice* reading of Paul. Is it fair to put (post)modern questions and concerns to an ancient writer, who belongs to a radically different world than ours? Or is it simply another form of anachronism?

The present chapter four will focus on a particular passage of the letter to the Romans, namely, 8:18-23. It is generally accepted that it is in this letter more than in any other that Paul deals with the issue of creation (*ktisis*) and its relationships with human beings. Australian New Testament scholar, Brendan Byrne, concedes that this is the “only time in his extant letters that Paul considers humans beings in relation the non-human created world.”⁶⁴¹ In view of the theme of this dissertation, it is then fitting that under the genre “letter,”

⁶³⁸ Burton Mack, *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic, and Legacy* (New York/ London: Continuum, 2003), 141.

⁶³⁹ Stephen Westerholm, *Preface to the Study of Paul* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), ix.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁴¹ Brendan J. Byrne, *Reckoning with Romans: A Contemporary Reading of Paul's Gospel* (Wilmington: Michael Glaser, 1986), 165.

this particular letter and the passage within it most centrally concerned with human relations with the more-than-human world occupies center stage.

Contextualizing Romans

Of the Pauline letters, perhaps Romans is the one that has attracted the most scholarship and has been critical to many of the most outstanding theological figures in the history of Christianity. It is fitting here to mention the influence of Romans on Augustine and Martin Luther, as well as on the whole Reformation. Luther himself commented that the epistle “is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul.”⁶⁴² Anders Nygren, a twentieth-century Lutheran bishop and scholar, adds that

What the gospel is, what the content of the Christian faith is, one learns to know in the Epistle to the Romans as in no other place in the New Testament. Romans gives us the gospel in its wide context. It gives us the right perspective and the standard by which we should comprehend all the constituent parts of the Gospels, to arrive at the true, intended picture.⁶⁴³

The epistle influenced not only the German Reformation, but also the French Reformation. Not only the letter did play a pivotal role in the world of the German reformers, but it also influenced the leading figure of the French speaking Reformation in Europe, John Calvin. To underlie the key importance

⁶⁴² Martin Luther, Preface to the Letter of S. Paul to the Romans in his “New Testament in German.” Cited in Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 1. The quotation is from *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35 (1960): 365.

⁶⁴³ Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1949), 3.

which the letter to the Romans played for the French reformer, a University of Dubuque scholar claims that

this epistle does indeed function as Calvin's passageway to the whole of scripture. All of Paul, but Romans in particular, creates a theological substructure, an invisible system of theological and ethical ideas, which guides Calvin to clarity in the interpretation of both the plain and the obscure passages. As the outline and details of Romans shaped Calvin's *Institutes*, providing a passageway into the whole of scripture, the fully digested contents of Romans served as a door through which Calvin traveled as he mined the treasure in the individual books of the Bible.⁶⁴⁴

Swiss scholar, Franz-J Leenhardt, in the dedication page of his study on the Epistle to the Romans declares, "*Scholae Genevensi ad quadringentesimum annum feliciter perductae hoc opus dedico quo scriptum illud paulinum melius intellegatur unde largissime hausit Joannes Calvinus conditor.*"⁶⁴⁵

Both the epistle and the ideas of Martin Luther eventually crossed the English Channel to influence the founder of the Methodist movement, the Anglican priest, John Wesley.⁶⁴⁶ In the twentieth century, the letter to the Romans played a pivotal role in Karl Barth's work, thus launching what became known as "dialectical theology" or "neo-orthodoxy" with all its strength and relevance for that particular moment in history. His study managed to bring "Paul and the Bible to the notice of some who had

⁶⁴⁴ Gary Neal Hansen, "Door and Passageway: Calvin's use of Romans as Hermeneutical and Theological Guide." In http://www.vanderblit.edu/AnS/religious_studies/sbl2006/Hnasen.htm. 4.01.2010.

⁶⁴⁵ Franz- J. Leenhardt, *L'Épître de Saint Paul aux Romains* (Neuchatel/ Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1957), 5. "To the University of Geneva, now four hundred years old, I dedicate this work which is destined to better understand a text which was the generous source of inspiration of its founder John Calvin". Translation mine.

⁶⁴⁶ In the entry of his diary dated May 24, 1738 Wesley, mentions that in that evening, in a meeting of the society on Aldersgate St., when someone was reading Luther's Preface to the Romans, he felt "a strange burning in my heart."

thought little about them,” claims the author.⁶⁴⁷ British scholar C. H. Dodd claimed that “the Epistle to the Romans is the first great work of Christian theology.”⁶⁴⁸ In view of such remarks, one is tempted to agree with Nygren when he concludes that “when man (*sic*) has slipped away from the gospel, a deep study of Romans has often been the means by which the lost has been recovered.”⁶⁴⁹ A. J. M. Wedderburn argues that it is “the most intensely analyzed writing in Western literature,”⁶⁵⁰ and Stephen Westerholm describes it as a text that “...is by a wide margin, the most influential non-narrative account of the Christian faith ever written.”⁶⁵¹

Regarding the Roman Christian community, the supposed addressees of the letter, it is generally acknowledged that it was not founded by Paul, nor is there any direct information about its founding.⁶⁵² Perhaps Paul was known by name to members of the Roman community. Nevertheless, scholars generally agree that he had never been present with them in the imperial capital, much to his regret (Rom.1:13). Paul states his keen interest to visit them on his way westward toward Spain (1:10; 15:23-24; 28) and tries to enlist their support for his new adventure to evangelize

⁶⁴⁷ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, Prologue to the Second Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 2. Despite the fact that neo- orthodox theologians in general tend to deny any significant role for the created order in biblical texts, taking a covenantal approach to creation and subordinating creation to redemption, Barth’s epigraph quoted at the beginning of this chapter clearly speaks about the “cosmic” character of Paul’s gospel message, involving humankind and otherkind. John Bolt views the traditional neo-orthodox approach, nonetheless, as “a twentieth century aberration.” See John Bolt, “The Relation between Creation and Redemption in Romans 8:12-27,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 30, no 1 (1995): 34-51.

⁶⁴⁸ C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1932), xiii.

⁶⁴⁹ Nygren, *Commentary*, 3.

⁶⁵⁰ A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Reasons for Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 5.

⁶⁵¹ Westerholm, *Preface to the Study of Paul*, x.

⁶⁵² “*L’origine de la communauté chrétienne de Rome demeure obscure*,” See Leenhardt, *L’Épître de Saint Paul aux Romains*, 8.

those who reside at the edge of the empire. Scholars agree that at the time of the writing/dictating of the letter, Paul was in Corinth or its vicinity, before going to Jerusalem, bringing with him the collection that the communities from Macedonia and Achaia prepared for “the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.” (15:25-26).⁶⁵³ The collection represented an extraordinary sign of solidarity in the midst of a rather hostile milieu.⁶⁵⁴ Scholars argue that the letter was carried by Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae (Rom. 16:1-2).⁶⁵⁵

German scholar Guenter Bornkamm is one of the defenders of the idea of the universal meaning of the letter. He claims that “Romans is the last will and testament of the Apostle Paul.”⁶⁵⁶ Kenneth Grayston claims that “the greater part [of the letter] is polemical, defensive, expository, speculative, instructional and magisterial.”⁶⁵⁷ Another German Lutheran scholar, Peter Stuhlmacher, following in the footsteps of Luther, claims that “Nowhere in the entirety of Holy Scripture is the nature of the gospel more clearly and exactly worked out than in the letter to the Romans. This is precisely what constitutes the theological significance of this letter.”⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵³ See Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 18.

⁶⁵⁴ See Dieter Georgi, *Remembering the Poor: The History of Paul's Collection for Jerusalem* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992). This text is based on his Ph. D. dissertation at the University of Heidelberg in 1962.

⁶⁵⁵ Crossan and Reid, *In Search of Paul*, 114; Leenhardt, *L'epitre*, 7.

⁶⁵⁶ Guenter Bornkamm, “The Letter to the Romans as Paul's Last Will and Testament,” in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried, 16-28 (expanded 2nd ed. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991).

⁶⁵⁷ Kenneth Grayson, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Epworth Press, 1997), ix.

⁶⁵⁸ Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 10.

Reacting against this traditional position that basically understands Romans as a generic, systematic, and detailed exposition of Paul's theological views-- in a nutshell a universal theological treatise-- Jewett contends that the epistle "should be viewed as a situational letter and that historical circumstances should be taken into account just as in the other letters."⁶⁵⁹ Fitzmyer concurs with this view and states that "Paul's letter is not an abstract, dogmatic treatise or a dialogue with Jews who do not accept his gospel; it is rather a didactic and hortatory letter, intended for the discussion by the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, for their understanding and for their conduct."⁶⁶⁰ After such a panoply of statements and (sometimes exaggerated) comments on the letter, it is worth mentioning what a Scandinavian scholar, Cristina Grenholm, specialized in studying and analyzing commentaries on Romans has to say, in a rather sobering conclusion:

Maybe we could say that we have the conventional commentaries we need. What we lack are books written from a conscious perspective, focusing on some theological issues which are critically explored and commenting on relevant parts of Romans. Those interpretations of Romans within a broader perspective of learning something about life itself, can never replace the standard commentaries but they would provide an important complement to them. Paul's epistle to the Romans deserves more daring, vivid and committed treatment than it usually is given by contemporary scholars, exegetes, and systematic theologians.⁶⁶¹

⁶⁵⁹ Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, 3. The author is well aware that the conflict of views on this matter "...is irresolvable. Neither the treatise nor the situational theory is able to clarify the peculiar relation between Paul and his audience that differentiates Romans from all of the other letters," he adds. *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶⁶⁰ Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 33 (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 1993), 79.

⁶⁶¹ Cristina Grenholm, "The Process of Interpretation of Romans," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1997 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1997), 333. In this paper she compares the commentaries on Romans penned by James D.G.

I am of the opinion that this particular letter as well as all the other “undisputed” Pauline letters should be viewed as specific writings responding to various concrete concerns (such as how to conduct the Lord’s supper, whether or not to eat food sacrificed to idols, or enthusiastic prophets in I Corinthians), or advancing definite proposals (such that of visiting the Roman *ekklēsia* and then continuing on towards Spain, the western extreme of the empire, as convincingly argued by Jewett).⁶⁶²

Concerning its genre, Jewett also concludes that “Romans is a unique fusion of the “ambassadorial letter” with several of the other subtypes in the genre: the parenetic letter, the hortatory letter, and the philosophical diatribe.”⁶⁶³ Scholars argue that the diatribe is the basic style used by Paul with adaptations and in his own style.⁶⁶⁴ Technically, the diatribe is an “artificial invention,” so-called, created by the author to sustain a particular argument.⁶⁶⁵

Dunn (*Romans*, 2 vols.); Joseph Fitzmyer (*Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*) and Peter Stuhlmacher (*Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary*). It is worth noting that her doctoral dissertation at Uppsala is entitled “Romans Interpreted: A Comparative Analysis of the Commentaries of Barth, Nygren, Cranfield and Wilkens on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans” (Ph. D. diss. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Studia Doctrinae Christianae Upsaliensia 30, Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1990).

⁶⁶² Robert Jewett, “The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Reading Romans 8:18-23 within the Imperial Context,” in *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, ed. Richard Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2004), 25-46.

⁶⁶³ Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, 44.

⁶⁶⁴ See Stanley Kent Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul’s Letters to the Romans*, SBL Dissertation Series (Chico: Scholars Press, 1981). For a scholarly review of the different ways scholars interpreted the letter, see Neil Elliot, *The Rhetoric of Romans: Argumentative Constraint and Strategy and Paul’s Dialogue with Judaism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), particularly 9-67, and for an ample bibliography on Romans, see James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Vol. 38A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, Texas: Word Books:1988), xxx-xxxviii; and the massive volume by Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, xxxv-lxix. Jewett contends that his work includes

Scholars debate the date of the composition of the letter. Estimates range between 55 C.E and 59 C.E., in any case, a time when Nero was the Roman emperor (54-68).⁶⁶⁶ The letter is supposed to be the last of the writings that Paul produced as a free person.⁶⁶⁷ Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Jewett does not hesitate to call Romans, “an anti-imperialistic letter,”⁶⁶⁸ and points out specific passages that reflect several aspects of the civic [imperial] cult which Paul strongly countered.⁶⁶⁹

Ecological perspectives on Romans 8:18-23: A survey.

“historical analysis; text criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism; rhetorical analysis; social scientific reconstruction of the situations in Rome and Spain, historical and cultural analysis of the honor, shame, and imperial systems in the Greco-Roman world: and a theological interpretation that takes these details into account rather than following traditional paths formed by church traditions.” Furthermore, he states that the method used in the commentary can be aptly described as “practical realism” (1).

⁶⁶⁵ See Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, 25-28.

⁶⁶⁶ For a more detailed explanation of the different scholars’ positions, see *ibid.*, 18-22, who concludes that “with a high degree of probability Romans was drafted in the winter of 56-57 C.E. or the early spring of 57 C.E.,”¹⁸; and C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. 1, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd., 1975), 17-24, who arrives at a similar conclusion.

⁶⁶⁷ Dodd, *Romans*, xxv. Other scholars, such as Grayson (see below) prefer to date the letter to Spring 56 C.E., dictated from Corinth.

⁶⁶⁸ Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, 2. Jewett further develops this particular view in analyzing the civic cult and the emperor’s cult developed by Octavian (Augustus) and followed by his successors. He reminds his readers that Nero, on his accession to the throne, was celebrated as the glorious leader who would usher in yet another Golden Age. See particularly pages 47-49. For a more complete description of the imperial cult, see the last chapter of this dissertation, the study on the book of Revelation. A more recent example of reading Romans from a similar perspective can be found in Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

⁶⁶⁹ Particularly 1:18; 1:25; 3:4; 3:10, “...all of which comprises the antithesis of official propaganda about Rome’s superior piety, justice and honor.” *Romans*, 49. Furthermore, referring to the key role that the system of honor (and shame) played in the Roman Empire, Jewett claims that “The argument about overturning this corrupt and exploitative honor system is found throughout Paul’s letter to the Romans.” *Ibid.*, 51.

As far as language is concerned, this portion of the letter to the Romans is of particular interest. Scholars such as Olle Christoffersson and others have called attention to the fact that several words in this passage are *hapax legomena* in Paul's undisputed letters.⁶⁷⁰

Different options, taken from the Hebrew Bible and other Jewish scriptures have been suggested as specific background or intertexts to understand Paul's reflections in this particular passage. For example, D.T. Sumura suggests that it is the text of Genesis 3:16, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbirth; in pain you shall bring forth children," that may have provided the "birth pangs" metaphor in Romans 8:22.⁶⁷¹

Christoffersson, in turn, assumes in his 1990 dissertation that Rom.8:18-27 uses apocalyptic ideas which can be found in early Jewish and Christian texts. Specifically, he argues that "new light can be thrown on the text if its religio-

⁶⁷⁰ Olle Christoffersson, *The Earnest Expectation of the Creature: The Flood Tradition as Matrix of Romans 8:18-27* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990), 14. He cites the following examples: *mataiotês* (futility) in v.20; *systematsein*, *synôdinein* (groaning, in labor pains, in travail) in v.22 combined with the prefix *syn* are very rarely used in Greek literature. Four are found in v.26 *synantilambanetai* (help us, only here and in Luke 10:40); *stenanmois* (sighs); *alalêtois* (too deep for words), *kathô dei* (how... as we ought); *apokaradokia* (eager longing, eager expectation, only here and in Phil. 1:20); and *chyperentunchanei* (intercede), a double compound which does not occur anywhere in the Greek Bible and is not known to occur previously in the work of any Greek writer. According to the *Clave Lingüística del Nuevo Testamento Griego*, (Buenos Aires: ISEDET, Ediciones La Aurora, 1986), 290, this is "a term formed by Paul himself." In v. 20, *ouch ekousa* (not of its own will) is rare, and Paul "writes" *eph elpidi* instead of the usual *ep elpidi* as in Rom.4:18, I Cor.9:10 (twice). Also words such as *apokalyupsin*-- used together with "the sons of God"-- is never used with an object of this kind, and *doxa* (glory) as a contrast to *phthora* (decay) in v.21, is used in a very peculiar way.

⁶⁷¹ D.T. Sumura, "An Old Testament Background to Rom. 8.22," *New Testament Studies* 40 (1994): 620-621.

historical background is carefully re-examined.”⁶⁷² For Christoffersson, all the different motifs and thoughts can be found in a single coherent tradition, namely, that of the Flood, particularly in Gen.1-6 and 1 Enoch 6-11. Conversely, Moo argues that “it is the Hebrew prophetic tradition that informs Paul’s thinking on this point; but it may be Isaiah 24-27 in particular that can illuminate the significance of the links Paul makes between the groaning of creation, the suffering and patient endurance of God’s people, and the resurrection hope.”⁶⁷³

Harry A. Hahne endeavors to make a detailed analysis of the influence of Jewish apocalyptic literature, from its earliest expression in 1 (*Ethiopic*) Enoch, through to the first century C.E. I Enoch Book 2; 4 Ezra; 2 (Syriac) Baruch; the Apocalypse of Moses; and The Life of Adam and Eve. He recognizes that “although the genre of this passage is not an apocalypse, the worldview, theology and many expressions are very similar to those found in Jewish apocalyptic works.”⁶⁷⁴ Moreover, he observes that the text at stake “... focuses on two major themes: (1) the present corruption of the subhuman (*sic*) creation that resulted from the fall of Adam and (2) the eschatological deliverance of creation from corruption to be transformed into freedom and glory. In his view, Paul repeatedly alternates between these twins themes of the corruption and redemption of creation.”⁶⁷⁵ For Marie Turner, the text is

⁶⁷² See Christoffersson, *The Earnest Expectation of the Creature*, 11.

⁶⁷³ Jonathan Moo, “Romans 8:19-22 and Isaiah’s Cosmic Covenant,” *New Testament Studies*, 54, no.1 (2008): 84.

⁶⁷⁴ Harry A. Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Nature in Romans 8:19-22 and Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 3.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

based on the understanding that Paul drew upon the book of the Wisdom of Solomon for his creation theology.⁶⁷⁶ Turner rescues the rich female figures in Wisdom and explores -- in her own words-- “a theology of life and death rather than a theology of sin and grace.”⁶⁷⁷ As it is evident, these five authors point to several options. Each of them can indeed be tested and they can, no doubt, shed light on the passage. But it seems appropriate to return to the question posed earlier in this study: is there still a place for a *socio-ecological* reading of Paul? Here lies the challenge of this chapter.

Romans 8 has produced a profusion of significant scholarly articles and commentaries.⁶⁷⁸ Heinrich Schlier, for instance, considers that this passage “constitutes the very centre [*der Hoehepunkt*] of the entire letter [to the Romans],”⁶⁷⁹ while Emil Brunner argues that it is “obscure and there is much controversy about its meaning.”⁶⁸⁰ From an ecological perspective, scholars’ opinions cover a very extensive range from rather narrow and crude anthropocentric positions to more radical and open understandings of creation/nature and its interrelation with human beings.

⁶⁷⁶ Marie Turner, “God’s Design: The Death of Creation? An Ecojustice Reading of Romans 8.18-30 in the Light of Wisdom 1-2,” in *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions*, 168-178.

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁶⁷⁸ Fitzmyer’s *Romans*, illustrates this matter. The book has fifty-one pages of general bibliography, and includes an additional bibliography particularly for chapter 8.

⁶⁷⁹ See Heinrich Schlier, 1965, ‘Das, worauf alles wartet. Eine Auslegung von Roemer 8,18-30, in *Interpretation der Welt, Festschrift fuer Romano Guardini zum achtzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. Helmut Kuhn (Wuerzburg: Echter, 1965), 599-616. As cited by Christoffersson, *The Earnest Expectation of the Creature*, 11.

⁶⁸⁰ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth, 1946), 128.

David J. Williams, for instance, argues that “[We] should not make too much of Paul’s reference here to nature.” “He is simply resorting,” adds Williams, “to the familiar literary convention of projecting the human drama onto the wide screen of the physical world in order to underline the point that *our* ‘pain’ will, in time, give way to God’s good things to come.”⁶⁸¹ Furthermore, C. K. Barrett explicitly states that Paul “is not concerned with creation for its own sake,”⁶⁸² and Ernst Kaesemann argues that “nature plays a very small role for the apostle.”⁶⁸³ Furthermore, John Bolt argues that it “is at risk of becoming little more than a mantra for Christian environmentalism today; at best reminding the redeemed that the creation itself is also the object of God’s salvific concern and at worst opening the door to theological panentheism,”⁶⁸⁴

⁶⁸¹ David J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors: Their Context and Character* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 1999), 72, n. 56.

⁶⁸² C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (HNTC; 2d. ed.: New York, Harper, 1991), 165.

⁶⁸³ Ernst Kaesemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 233.

⁶⁸⁴ John Bolt, “The Relation between Creation and Redemption in Romans 8:18-27,” *Calvin Theological Journal*, 30, no.1 (1995): 34. Despite his seeming aversion to panentheism in this article, Bolt critiques and corrects the neo-orthodox anthropological-soteriological reading of creation and asserts that “exegetical-theological judgments that posit a relative independence of creation with respect to human redemption are correct,” 35. A much more positive understanding of panentheism can be found in a critical piece by Jurgen Moltmann. He argues that: “[I]n the panentheistic view, God, having created the world, also dwells in it, and conversely the world which he (*sic*) has created exists in him (*sic*). This is a concept which can really only be taught and described in Trinitarian terms.” See Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, trans. Margareth Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1985), 98. Also, a positive description can be found in process theologians, such as John B. Cobb. Cobb writes: “God is not the world, and the world is not God. But God includes the world, and the world includes God. God perfects the world, and the world perfects God. There is no world apart from God, and there is no God apart from some world... God’s life depends on there being some world to include.” Charles Birch and John B. Cobb Jr., *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 196. See also Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), Marcus J. Borg, “Re-visioning Christianity,” in *The Once and*

and Jonathan Moo contends that it is “the text most frequently cited by those seeking to employ Christian Scripture for an environmental agenda.”⁶⁸⁵

Contrary to these views, Hahne argues that this text “is the most important passage expressing the Apostle Paul’s theology of the present condition and eschatological hope of the natural world,”⁶⁸⁶ and N.T. Wright exultantly concludes that Romans 8 is “Paul’s most spectacular piece of creation-theology, a bursting out of a fresh reading of Genesis 1-3, coupled with the Exodus narrative of liberation from slavery and the journey to the promised inheritance: creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay, to share the freedom of the glory of God’s children.”⁶⁸⁷

Hunt, Horrell and Southgate, after laboring with the text at length, believe “that drawing on Romans 8 to outline an ethical response to our environmental challenges will require an imaginative, theologically, and scientifically informed engagement which goes well beyond what Paul himself might have envisaged.”⁶⁸⁸ This is a phenomenal challenge for all those concerned with the Bible, its messages, and its eventual contribution to the pressing problems facing humankind today. Moreover, after their careful review, Hunt, Horrell, and Southgate conclude with the following remark, closer to a truism: “As

Future Jesus /The Jesus Seminar, ed. John S. Spong (Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 2000), 45-62, particularly page 53, and Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 106-108.

⁶⁸⁵ Jonathan Moo, “Romans 8:19-22 and Isaiah’s Cosmic Covenant,” *New Testament Studies*, 54, no.1 (2008): 74.

⁶⁸⁶ Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 1.

⁶⁸⁷ N.T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, Hulsean Lectures at Cambridge University (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 31.

⁶⁸⁸ Cheryl Hunt, David Horrell, Christopher Southgate, “An Environmental Mantra? Ecological Interest in Romans 8:19-23 and a Modest Proposal for its Interpretation,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS. Vol. 59, Pt. 2 (2008): 576.

would be expected, it is only in works of the past three or four decades that we find ecological concerns explicitly mentioned in connection with this passage.”⁶⁸⁹ Furthermore, they pose a challenge to theologians and other biblical scholars for, in their view, “...with partial exceptions, none of these [modern] writers offers a detailed and hermeneutically developed engagement with biblical texts such as Romans 8, and most fail to deal with the exegetical uncertainties and its context in the letter ... or to explore in detail its ecotheological implications.”⁶⁹⁰

Horsley evidently enlarges the scope of the analysis of the letter and consequently of the pericope in question. He comments on and critiques the traditional (western) way in which Paul’s interpreters have read him, only in “religious” terms, separating religion from politics and socio-economic realities, and believing that his main concern is “primarily a question of individual faith.”⁶⁹¹ For Horsley, the letters of Paul should be read in the specific context of the Roman Empire. In his view, “Christ and the Gospel... stand opposed to Caesar and the Roman imperial order.”⁶⁹² This particular understanding has important consequences for the interpretation of the texts, particularly as the third hermeneutical *principle* of ecojustice and Social Ecology speaks of the interrelatedness of economy, ecology, and politics, as will be shown below.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid., 551.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid., 551.

⁶⁹¹ Richard Horsley, “Introduction”, in *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, ed. Horsley, 1.

⁶⁹² Ibid., 4.

Robert Jewett adds his own insights into this line of interpretation of the text. He chooses to go back to Greco-Roman texts and culture to find out how “the corruption and redemption of nature” is understood there. He explicitly cites Virgil’s *Fourth Eclogue* (*Ecl.* 4.11.-41), and his *Aeneid* (6.789-794), where “the link with the reigning Augustus becomes explicit,” to show the restoration of the earth to its primeval paradisiacal condition: “The Golden Age in the fields once ruled by Saturn.”⁶⁹³ Furthermore, Jewett recalls the fact that the poet Horace was commissioned to write the official poem for the celebration of the Saecular Games organized by Augustus in 17 B.C.E. Horace, in his *Carmen Saeculare* writes:

May the earth be fertile for harvests and herds,
and give to Ceres her garland of wheat ears;
may the crops be nourished
by Jupiter’s goods breezes and showers.

Subsequently, Jewett argues, several monuments were erected to celebrate the restoration of the fruitfulness of nature and its epitome is the *Ara Pacis Augustae* (the Altar of the Augustan Peace), which “symbolizes the return of this lost age of bounty and goodness.”⁶⁹⁴ As it is well-known, Mother Earth restored, a female figure representing Rome in a sitting position, is its central figure. This image became popular through the many altars built and coins produced in the time of Augustus and his successors. Jewett suggests that these elements are implicit rather than explicit in the letter to the Romans, and that the imperial context serves as a foil for the arguments of Paul, who indeed has a totally different view on the issue.

Jewett brings forward another key insight which is of relevance for this particular dissertation. He claims that

⁶⁹³ Jewett, “The Corruption and Redemption of Creation,” 27.

⁶⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

Paul's idea of the natural world eagerly awaiting its own redemption moves in the direction of modern ecological theory, which is beginning to recapture an ancient view of the world as a living organism.... In a vision with extraordinary relevance for the modern world, Paul implies that the entire creation waits with bated breath for the emergence and empowerment of those who will take responsibility for its restoration, small groups of the *huiou tou theou* [sons of God]... These converts take the place of Caesar in the imperial propaganda about the golden age... As children of God are redeemed by the gospel, they begin to regain a rightful dominion over the created world (Gen. 1:28-30; Ps. 8:5-8); in more modern terms, their altered life style and revised ethics begin to restore the ecological system that had been thrown out of balance by wrongdoing (Rom 1:18-32) and sin (Rom.5-7). In contrast to the civic cult, Paul does not have a magical transformation of nature en view.⁶⁹⁵

Brendan Byrne, in turn, reads the text from “the perspective of the Earth,” applying the ecojustice hermeneutical principles of the Earth Bible project mentioned before in chapter two of this study, notably, *voice, interconnectedness, purpose, and resistance*.⁶⁹⁶ Byrne notes that the text in question has recently received a fair amount of attention. Nevertheless, in his opinion, “it has been fairly superficial.”⁶⁹⁷ He is convinced that the background of this text is the creation stories of Genesis 1-3, and that the letter in general is “an attempt to communicate an *inclusive vision* of the people of God.”⁶⁹⁸ For Byrne, there is an intrinsic interconnection and solidarity, both positive and negative, in sin (Adam is the paradigm) and in grace (Christ is the paradigm), among all human beings, and he insists that this “solidarity” is extensive “to the non-human material world.”⁶⁹⁹ This is indeed a compelling insight, which breaks with the traditional reading of justification by faith (in an almost

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁹⁶ Brendan Byrne, “Creation Groaning: An Earth Bible Reading of Romans 8.18-22,” in *Readings from the Perspective of the Earth*, ed. Norman C. Habel, 193-203.

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid., 193.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., 194. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid., 196.

anthropomonistic way) in Romans. “When the situation of human beings deteriorates, so does that of the rest of creation and, vice versa, when it goes well, the creation shares in the blessing,”⁷⁰⁰ writes Byrne convincingly. Such assertion takes us closer to the seventh principle of ecojustice/social ecology, that is, the correlation between exploitation of human by humans and exploitation of nature, but regrettably Byrne does not take the necessary further steps to intentionally reach to that conclusion in a sharper and more concrete/materialistic and structural way (see below). Nevertheless, he argues that “we can validly find in this text an allusion to the evil consequences that ensue for the non-human world when selfishness, greed and exploitation, rather than creative responsibility, mark human behavior on this planet.”⁷⁰¹ Hope is for the Australian scholar a central contention in this passage and the groaning of the creation is “an index of hope.”⁷⁰² Therefore, he comes to the confident conclusion that “there can also be care and responsibility... when human beings respond to and act in accordance with the grace of God.”⁷⁰³

Horsley, Jewett, and Byrne indeed open up the understanding of the text and provide a wider and sounder perspective for it. They go beyond the ecotheological implications requested by Hunt, Horrel, and Southgate and come closer to an ecojustice and social ecology reading. Nevertheless, in the analysis of the three scholars, no social mediations or specific historical praxis--as limited and fragile as they may be-- are suggested as how this care and responsibility can be made real and concrete. Ecojustice and social ecology

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid., 197.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid., 199.

⁷⁰² Ibid., 198.

⁷⁰³ Ibid., 200.

may help us to take further steps in the direction of a fuller human participation in and accountability for a construction of a more just and ecological society. For instance, if the groaning of creation is an “index of hope,” then, how can hope be articulated, actualized and made attainable? How can it become “awakened hope,” to use an expression dear to Juergen Moltmann?⁷⁰⁴ Which are the most appropriated sociopolitical mediations to be created in order to actualize hope? And eventually, once these are attained, they must be again and again be subjected to serious scrutiny and critique in light of the needs of people and nature and in the wider and deeper horizons of the kingdom (see previous chapter). The fifth principle of ecojustice/social ecology dealing with radicality and utopian thinking finds its rightful place in this specific context. This principle reminds us that “partial ‘solutions’ serve merely as cosmetics to conceal the deep-seated nature of the ecological crisis.”⁷⁰⁵

Ridan, the former rap star and well-known French composer and singer, seems to capture in (post)modern and popular jargon the essence of Paul’s ideas, in light of the current environmental predicament. Obviously, he uses the occasion to add his own understanding of the reasons why we have reached this point in the ecological plight of the earth and her creatures:

*Elle pleure, elle pleure,
Elle pleure ma planète!
Elle sent que sa fin est proche
Et ça la rend folle!
Dites-leur, dites-leur,
dites-leur qu’ils sont fou!*

⁷⁰⁴ Juergen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1967), 326.

⁷⁰⁵ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 3.

La terre en a ras le bol un point c'est tout!...

*...L'air pur ici aussi se fait si rare,
Que même les clébards disent
qu'ils y en a marre!
de respirer cette merde à pleins poumons,
tout ça pour qu'un petit con
gagne des millions...*

*... La nature est a moi je suis sa mère
Vous dechainerez mes nerfs je serai guerre
qu'elles volent vos maison au-delà des mers...
qu'elles jaillissent, les eaux,
sur votre espèce!
vous n'aurez plus conscience
de votre petitesse
Je ferai de vos villes ce bel enfer,
plus chalereux encore que le paradis.
Vous tremblerez de peur dans vos demeures
car l'homme a fait de l'homme
cette chose sans vie...⁷⁰⁶*

Creation (*ktisis*)

Can Paul's *ktisis* (creation) simply be understood as *la planète*, that is, our planet Earth, as the singer implies? The majority of scholars are convinced that this word plays a fundamental role in the understanding of the text. It is precisely the discussion on the meaning of this very key word that has generated hundreds of pages in the scholarly debate about this passage. Christoffersson contends that from Augustine to Schlier (*Der Roemerbrief*) exegetes have considered that the word *ktisis* in this passage is both "a central problem" and "a primary difficulty."⁷⁰⁷

As usual, opinions diverge. Cranfield holds to a traditional position which argues that *ktisis* has a rather restrictive meaning. For him, "believers must almost certainly be excluded...The only interpretation of *ktisis* in these verses

⁷⁰⁶ <http://yep.mikehorn.com/music/gallery>.

⁷⁰⁷ Christoffersson, *The Earnest Expectation of the Creature*, 11.

which is really probable seems to be that which understands the reference to be to the sum-total of sub-human nature both animate and inanimate.”⁷⁰⁸

Susan Eastmann basically follows this idea, and contends that most commentators “...take *ktisis* as referring to the natural order of creation apart from humanity,”⁷⁰⁹ Hunt, Horrell and Southgate, in turn, expand the understanding of *ktisis*. They propose a brief and interesting historical overview of the diverse understanding of the word. Their work includes the Church Fathers, such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Augustine, John Chrysostom, and Ambrose. They also review Thomas Aquinas and the reformers of the sixteenth century. Twentieth century theologians such as Karl Barth, Ernst Kaesemann, and Jurgen Moltmann as well as recent biblical scholars feature also in their review.⁷¹⁰ They come to the conclusion that “the term is generally assumed to apply to various combinations of one or more of the following non-overlapping sets: angelic beings, believers, nonbelievers, non-human living creation, the inanimate elements of non-human creation.”⁷¹¹ Ernst Kaesemann has even a wider understanding and claims that in the text in question, as well as that of Rom.1:20, *ktisis* refers to creation including humankind, with no sharp line of differentiation.⁷¹²

According to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, the word *ktisis* explicitly refers to nature, both organic and inorganic. Furthermore, it adds that

⁷⁰⁸ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary to the Epistle to the Romans*. The International Critical Commentary, Vol. I, 412.

⁷⁰⁹ Susan Eastman, “Whose Apocalypse? The Identity of the Sons of God in Romans 8:19,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121/2 (2002): 263-277.

⁷¹⁰ Hunt, Horrell, and Southgate, “An Environmental Mantra?,” 546-579.

⁷¹¹ *Ibid.*, 558.

⁷¹² Kaesemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 232-236.

“... this usage, which occurs in the LXX, poses quite a riddle, since there are no parallels in Greek or Rabbinic usage.”⁷¹³ Nevertheless, the author concludes that in this particular passage, *ktisis* “here refers to the *whole* of creation.”⁷¹⁴ Likewise, the *Clave Lingüística del Nuevo Testamento* agrees with this perspective saying that “[*ktisis*] has a collective meaning... it comprises everything that has been created by divine action.”⁷¹⁵ Even John Wesley was of this opinion. In his famous sermon “The General Deliverance,” he argues that “[creation here] includes everyone, even pagans....”⁷¹⁶ Juergen Moltmann uses the expression “the community of creation,” to describe on the religious level both “the natural world in which we share, and our own bodily nature.”⁷¹⁷ I favor strongly this wide interpretation of *ktisis*, for it does justice to the ecological reality of the community of subjects, closely linked in manifold ways and deeply interrelated and interdependent.

It is worth noting the richness of the personified feminine and maternal imagery used in this specific text. Creation (*ktisis*) is depicted as a woman “groaning in labor pains” (v.22), or as Sigve Tonstad graphically observes, *ktisis* is here the pregnant woman who takes the pulpit.⁷¹⁸ In the female labor, associated with giving birth, pain and joy are inextricably bound together. The

⁷¹³ Werner Forester, *Ktitso, ktisis, ktitma, ktistes*, in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. III. Translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 1000-1035. Here 1029. Emphasis mine.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid., 1031.

⁷¹⁵ *Clave Lingüística*, 289.

⁷¹⁶ Sermon 60, in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, vol.6 (3rd edition London: John Mason, 1829), 245.

⁷¹⁷ Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, 3.

⁷¹⁸ Sigve Tonstad, “Creation Groaning in Labor Pains,” in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman Habel and Peter Trudinger, 141-149 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008).

ever flowing newness of life bursts forth in the midst of pain and groans. On this particular feminine imagery it is interesting to refer to the convincing critique of Luzia Sutter Rehman.⁷¹⁹ She strongly argues against “the androcentric reduction of birthing to suffering, pain, and the production of sons.”⁷²⁰ Sutter Rehman advocates the need for “re-naming of giving birth... connected to the work of a new generation, a new earth coming into being.” She rightly argues that “The re-naming of women’s work, of the powers of the body, would be a valorization of the body, of our personal and social body, of *the earth* as the being in which we exist and *the cosmos* to which we belong in a larger way.”⁷²¹ Furthermore, the Swiss theologian asks some concluding poignant questions, such as “Does his [Paul’s] talk of labor disqualify female bodily experiences? Does he discredit women who have never been mothers?”⁷²² Holmes Rolston agrees with this view from a totally different perspective. He observes that “[Now] we find regeneration coupled with suffering. *Birthing*, which is really also the root for the word *nature*, (Greek [*sic!*]: *natans*, ‘giving birth’) is a transformative experience where suffering is the prelude to creation, indeed struggle is the principle of creation. Struggle is always going on, and it is this struggle in which life is regenerated. Nature is always giving birth, regenerating, always in travail”⁷²³ Furthermore, and concerning maternal image, Beverly Roberts Gaventa interestingly concludes:

⁷¹⁹ “To Turn the Groaning into Labor: Romans 8:22-23,” in *A Feminist Companion to Paul*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff, 74-97 (London/New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2004).

⁷²⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁷²¹ *Ibid.*, 75. Emphasis original.

⁷²² *Ibid.*, 84.

⁷²³ Holmes Rolston III, “Does Nature Need to be Redeemed?” *Zygon* 29, no 2 (1994): 213. Emphasis original.

“ Statistically ... Paul uses maternal imagery more often than he does paternal imagery, a feature that is simply astonishing, especially when we consider its virtual absence from most of our discussions of the Pauline letters.”⁷²⁴ This insight is particularly relevant for Romans, which, as Byrne claims, “appears unrelentingly masculine in its imagery and in the selection of Scriptural characters (e.g. Abraham, Adam, Moses, Pharaoh, Jacob and Esau) to which it appeals.”⁷²⁵

As far as the feminine imagery is concerned, ecojustice and ecofeminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether, caution her readers. She calls the attention to a specific “Patriarchal ideology [which] perceives the earth or nature as a female or as a feminine reality. As such, nature is considered to be inferior to men... and a tool to be exploited by men.”⁷²⁶ Radford Ruether concludes her chapter with a summons. This summons is very similar to the tenets defended by social ecologists. She claims that “In order to create an ecological culture and society, we must transform relationships of domination and exploitation into relationships of mutual support.”⁷²⁷ When Paul uses

⁷²⁴ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “‘Our Mother St Paul’: Toward the Recovery of a Neglected Theme,” in *A Feminist Companion to Paul*, 90.

⁷²⁵ Byrne, “Creation Groaning,” 201.

⁷²⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Eco-feminism and Theology,” in *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, 199.

⁷²⁷ Ibid., 204. Bookchin, analyzing the historical roots of domination and hierarchy, contends that “Even before social classes emerged and the priesthood established quasi-political temple despotisms over society, the patriarch embodied in a social form the very system of authority that the State later embodied in a political form... The earliest victim of this domineering relationship was *human* nature, notably, the human nature of women. Although patriarchy represents a highly authoritarian form of gerontocracy... women increasingly lost her parity with man as the latter gained social ascendancy over the domestic sphere of life with the expansion of his civil sphere... In a civilization that devalues nature, she is the ‘image of nature,’ the ‘weaker and smaller.’ *The Ecology of Freedom*, 121.

feminine imagery is he merely reinscribing patriarchal ideology? Or can we say that he was anticipating the French poet, Louis Aragon, who said “*la femme est l’avenir de l’homme*.”⁷²⁸ In any case, the need for gender justice and just relations between human beings and between us and the whole creation is to be kept as an objective to be achieved for the well-being of all creatures.

In v. 18, Paul contrasts the present reality to the future glory (*doxa*), and the emphasis is on the future, which is highlighted as something which is of greater importance and which has more weight. *Ktisis*, which is waiting for eager longing (v.19), finally will be set free (v.21). It is hope (v.24) that drives the future-oriented creation. This thrust is close to the ideas developed in the last chapters of the book of Revelation (see last chapter of this dissertation) and seems to me pivotal to the understanding of this passage. The whole perspective is geared towards the future and opens up the future, as Paul explains in v. 18: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy comparing with the glory about to be revealed in us.”

According to Paul, creation, the *whole* creation with all its creatures, is described as going through four characteristics stages, all of them at the same time: 1) is waiting “with eager longing (*apokaradokia*) for the revelation

⁹¹ Louis Aragon (1897-1982) wrote: “ *La femme est l’avenir de l’homme, au sens où Marx disait que l’homme est l’avenir de l’homme*.” French composer, Jean Ferrat, popularized the saying in a song that states:

*Le poète a toujours raison
Qui voit plus haute que l’horizon
Et le futur est son royaume
Face à notre génération
Je déclare avec Aragon
La femme est l’avenir de l’homme.*

(*apokalypsin*) of the children of God (*huiōn tou theou*) (v.19); 2) is subjected to futility (*mataioēti*) (v.20); 3) will be set free from its bondage to decay (*eleutherōthēsetai*) and will obtain its freedom (*eleutherian*) (v.21); and, 4) groans in labor pains (*systematsei kai synōdineī*) (v.22). One question immediately comes to mind: How is it possible to perceive that eager waiting and to hear her/its groans and its/her voice? It is interesting to remind ourselves of David Wood's comments, when he observes that "Many creatures clearly do have voices – we simply cannot understand their calls and cries. And everything that lives has interest that can be met or frustrated. It is hard to doubt that being poisoned, or losing the habitat necessary for survival, is against the interest of whatever creature suffers this fate."⁷²⁹

Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God (v 19)

Creation "waits with eager longing (*apokaradokia... apekdexetai*) for the revealing of the children of God" (*apokalypsin tōn huiōn tou theou*). Cranfield explains that the basic idea of *apokaradokia* is "that of stretching the neck, craning forward (*kara* is a poetic synonym of *kephalē*)."⁷³⁰ Creation is portrayed as someone making a real effort and showing marked interest in what is to come. Jewett observes that the expression can be better translated as "confident expectation,"⁷³¹ while Dunn uses the analogy of a play and observes that "... creation being, as it were, the audience eagerly watching the

⁷²⁹ "Specters of Derrida: On the Way to Econstruction," in *ECOSPIRIT*, 286.

⁷³⁰ Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary to the Epistle to the Romans*, 410.

⁷³¹ Jewett, "Corruption and Redemption of Creation," 34.

human actors play their parts on the world stage.”⁷³² Sutter Rehman reinforces the active role of creation in this text. She explains that it is “the head of creation that is on the lookout... and its body is longing with intense expectation. It certainly does not mean that creation is passively waiting. On the contrary, creation is at work birthing a new world.”⁷³³

What kind of reveling or revelation --*la manifestación* in the Spanish translation-- is creation expecting? After serious scientific research we know today that the earth/ nature (*ktisis*) managed relatively well during millions of years even before bipeds/human beings registered their footprint on its soil. Moreover, during subsequent millennia, and despite the presence of the *homo faber/sapiens*, the earth also managed to survive relatively well. This does not mean that it was free of contradictions, ambiguities, and struggles. On the contrary, as Southgate reminds his readers, “Predation, violence, parasitism, suffering, and extinction were integral parts of the natural order long before *homo sapiens*.”⁷³⁴ It is rather recently, in the wake of the beginnings of the industrial revolution in the West and its ensuing colonial expansion, coupled with unprecedented technological developments, that the balanced relations between nature and humans (here the *huioi tou theou*?) started to acquire catastrophic results (see chapter one of this dissertation). In the light of the current ecological/ environmental predicament, is it still relevant to wait for “the revealing of the children of God?” And if so, what would this entail?

⁷³² James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Dallas: World Books, 1988), 470.

⁷³³ Sutter Rehman, “To Turn the Groaning into Labor: Romans 8:22-23,” 76.

⁷³⁴ Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 28. Southgate studies Romans 8 from the perspective of evolutionary science, and describes his position as “evolutionary theodicy.”

The fourth hermeneutical principle of social ecology/ecojustice articulated earlier, in the second chapter, speaks of the dignity of life, of its defense, and of its integrity. The invasive presence, the greedy activity, the technological might of the powerful of today's world and their ensuing impact on the earth--characterized by Gudynas as a development model that chiefly embodies a "praxis of death"-- have managed to basically threaten the very existence of life of the planet as we know it. This praxis of death has to stop if life on the planet Earth for future generations is envisaged.⁷³⁵ Regrettably, we know that it will not stop by itself. A radical alteration and shift need to take place. A change from a praxis of death to a praxis of/for life is urgently needed. Perhaps it is here where certain aspects of the meaning of "revealing" start to acquire a new sense.⁷³⁶ In what way could "the children of God" be a transforming agency and powerful instrument to help to reverse the tidal wave of destruction and plunder. Are human beings capable of responding to such a phenomenal challenge? And, if so, how? In what ways? I strongly believe that there is a full and open socio-political, economic, ecological, and ethical "program" possible here. This is a program that human beings have to develop and put

⁷³⁵ Gudynas elsewhere describes the process of the "fragmentation of life," which results from the neoliberal environmental/economic policies. These policies are aimed to privatize basic commodities that belong to the common good, such as seeds, and particularly, water. Gudynas eloquently argues that "*La vida es entonces fragmentada en sus componentes más básicos y dividida entre propietarios. Se cierra de este modo un círculo: para maximizar el potencial económico de la ciencia, el mercado libre neoliberal requiere de la libertad de propiedad sobre las unidades genéticas que encierran las plantas, los animales y microorganismos. Esta fragmentación de la vida, seguramente desembocará en nuevas formas de concentración de la riqueza y de controles sobre la producción.*" See "La privatización de la vida: América Latina ante las nuevas políticas ambientales neoliberales," *PASOS* 81 (1999): 7.

⁷³⁶ Jewett, *Romans*, 512, n. 52, summarizes some traditional conceptions of the meaning of "revealing" in this text.

into practice in order to respond to the eager longing of the whole creation.⁷³⁷

In this particular context, Social Ecology/ecojustice principles acquire relevance and meaning as guidelines for a responsible and effective ecological, social, and political participation in society and in history.

Let us remind ourselves again of that rather positive albeit timid claim made by Robert Jewett and quoted at length above. In the wider context of the exegetical work on this passage, Jewett reminds his readers that Paul, over against the propaganda of the Empire, is convinced that “the avenue of divine action is the conversion of humans rather than their colonization under a ruler pretending to be a god... So what the creation awaits...is the emergence of this triumph of divine righteousness (cf. Rom 1:17).”⁷³⁸ For Jewett, this new reality “will begin to restore a rightful balance to the creation once again overcoming the Adamic legacy of corruption and disorder...”⁷³⁹ Furthermore, Jewett argues that “... Paul’s audience could well have thought about how imperial ambitions, military conflicts, and economic exploitation had led to the erosion of the natural environment throughout the Mediterranean world, leaving the

⁷³⁷ In critical contrast to this position, Hunt, Horrell, and Southgate share a skeptical opinion concerning the role of humans in the text. They argue that “There is no explicit statement in Romans 8—considered by itself—that humans are expected to play any substantive role in ‘liberating’ *ktisis*. The narrative in itself primarily encourages them to endure their suffering, a groaning which the whole of creation shares, because of the certainty of God’s final deliverance. Thus, any ethical mandate ‘to work toward the goal of creation’s final transformation’, or even ‘to be involved in working toward those ends that God will finally secure through his own sovereign intervention’ cannot simply be read directly from this text, but can only emerge from an imaginative and creative engagement with it, and with the wider resources of Pauline (and, more broadly, Christian) theology.” Hunt, Horrell, and Southgate, “An Environmental Mantra?,” 572.

⁷³⁸ Jewett, *Romans*, 512.

⁷³⁹ *Ibid.*, 512.

ruined cities, depleted fields, deforested mountains, and polluted streams as evidence of this universal human vanity.”⁷⁴⁰ One can find here an interesting insight that convincingly combines personal (*not* individual/ istic) transformation with a critical political position *vis à vis* the ruling socio-economic and political system (in this case, the Empire). He concludes with the following statement: “[Paul] assumes that the renewed mind of such groups will be able to discern what God wills for the ecosystem. So the eager longing of the creation awaits the appearance of such transformed persons knowing that the sources of ecological disorder will be addressed by them in due season”⁷⁴¹ As important and convincing as this argument is, it is to be noted again that Jewett stops short of taking a step further and spelling out the concrete and specific ethical, political, and social implications of how to address the problem. There seems to be a certain *tabu* difficult to remove here. The season seems to approach very quickly as time is running out. The clock is ticking, and the horizon that signals the limits of the carrying capacity of our planet is fast approaching and more visible. The cries of the earth and the cries of the poor ---to use the words of the Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff-- are becoming increasingly louder.

Again, some of the hermeneutical principles of Social Ecology /ecojustice may come to our rescue here. Bookchin speaks of the clear interrelationship and correlation

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid., 513.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid., 513. In response to Jewett’s position articulated elsewhere, Sigve Tonstad expresses extreme caution, to the point of falling into a seemingly passive and defeatist attitude. She is of the opinion that “to believe that the forces of exploitation and oppression will at least be tamed by the action of the ‘children of God’... seems to overestimate the impact of God’s children whether in the light of the biblical or the contemporary evidence.” See “Creation Groaning in Labor Pains,” 148. Such a statement begs the question: If this is so, then what is left to do?

between the exploitation of humans and the exploitation of nature by humans. As we have explained before, this understanding lies at the heart of Social Ecology, whose task, according its founder, is to search for the “reharmonization of nature and humanity through a reharmonization of human with human.”⁷⁴² The “reharmonization” concretely entails --*inter alia*—the creation of social, economic, ecological and political conditions whereby all barriers that separate humans from humans are eliminated. These barriers include sexism, racism, classism, ageism, which are some the underlying causes of the praxis of death alluded to above.

It is my argument that despite limitations and dangers that result from the ambiguities, ambivalences, and fragmentation of humans beings -- what the Scripture calls “sin”-- it is the responsibility of humans beings to deal with the realities of this world, to correct, change, and fix them, particularly when they are in conflict and contradiction with God’s call for justice and peace. Such an understanding entails a concept of God which is not the classic theistic model or the traditional concept of a divine being, “out there,” who intervenes from time to time in history. Rather, it falls to us, the human species, to be actively engaged in the transformation of the world in which we live. History is the realm of human activity, the ambiguous but inescapable arena where struggles are fought, failures occur, negotiations take place, dreams are dreamt, and revolutionary changes are made.

I am fully aware of the problematic that this issue may entail. I am definitely not advocating certain naïve optimism about a supposed goodness in human beings. Two world wars waged in the last century and very many others that continue to plague our societies today are clear testimonies of the ambivalence,

⁷⁴² Bookchin, “An Ecological Society,” 11.

arrogance, and *hubris* that exist in human beings. Indeed, caution should be exercised. Warnings are to be put in place.⁷⁴³ It is imperative that human beings must learn from the painful lessons of history. The brutalities, crimes, oppressions, the abuses of power, racism, genocides, together with the myriad of atrocities committed against other human beings and against the earth -- many of them made in the name of certain understandings of “justice,” “god,” or “progress”-- must remind us of the serious limitations, ambiguity, and contradictions of any human endeavor. Confronted with such atrocities, “never again” should be the guiding principle.⁷⁴⁴ And such a principle needs to be coupled with the following one: “Another world is possible.”⁷⁴⁵ Christopher Southgate, despite some caveats concerning the role of humans and his critique of the classic understanding of “stewardship,” concedes that “[G]od’s action to preserve God’s lovely and ‘good’ biosphere would presumably be through humans as agents. In this limited sense I consider it entirely valid to speak of human stewardship of the planet.”⁷⁴⁶ To put it into ever more traditional religious and theological language, one can make reference to the already

⁷⁴³ One example among many others of the need to be extremely careful about human Promethean and uncontrolled (technological and political) power is to be found in Hans Jonas’ *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago/ London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984). Despite his convincing critique of the irrational and uncontrolled use of technological power, the Jewish philosopher’s critique of a particular expression of Marxist utopianism (Ernst Bloch’s *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*), and of its seemingly optimistic and naïve anthropology, is sometimes too simplistic and caricatural. Nonetheless, his truism is well taken and serves as a reminder: “Men are men and not angels” (160).

⁷⁴⁴ *Nunca más* is an expression used in Latin America, particularly in Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, and Chile which refers to the military dictatorships that overthrew democratic elected governments and seized power during the decades of the 60’s and 70’s.

⁷⁴⁵ Motto of the World Social Forum (WSF). See www.forumsocialmundial.org

⁷⁴⁶ Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 110.

classic and relevant book by T. F. Torrance, who emphasized the priestly and co-redeemerly actions of human beings.⁷⁴⁷

These reflections also bring us closer to the important Jewish concept of *Tikkun Olam*, that is, to perfect/ correct or repair the world. This is clearly an ecojustice understanding from the perspective of the Jewish tradition. In a remarkable holistic explanation of the concept, Arthur Green describes the close relationship that exists between a committed spirituality and an engagement for change of the unjust sociopolitical, economic and ecological realities of the world. This is also traditionally represented in stretching the ancient religious expression *ora et labora*, and more recently articulated in the ecumenical search for a spirituality for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.⁷⁴⁸

⁷⁴⁷ T. F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁷⁴⁸ Green claims that “*Tikkun Olam* which means ‘mending the world’ is an ancient Hebrew phrase that has taken on a new life in the past few decades. Its verbal form is found in the ‘*alenu*’ prayer, which concludes every service in the traditional synagogue. There ‘*le-takken-olam*’ means ‘to establish the world in the Kingdom of the Almighty (*shaddai*) or to bring about God’s rule on earth. In contemporary usage, it refers to the betterment of the world, including the relief of human suffering, the achievement of peace and mutual respect among peoples, and the protection of the planet, itself, from destruction....The Torah’s call that we “pursue justice, only justice” (Deuteronomy 16:20)...The rediscovery of ancient spiritual forms in recent decades has paralleled an age of activism and social change. In some cases they have been separated from, or even opposed to, one another. Many of those attracted to seeking spirituality have given up on the possibility of any serious improvements in the human condition altogether. In the case of Judaism, such bifurcation of spiritual and sociopolitical concerns is hardly possible. Anyone who tries to undertake it ultimately has to deal with the prophets of ancient Israel, still the strongest and most uncompromising advocates for social justice our world has known. If you try to create a closed world of lovely Jewish piety and build it on foundations of injustice and degradation of others, Isaiah and Amos will not let you sleep.” See *These are the Words: A Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life* (Woodstock, VT.: Jewish Lights, 1999), 175 ff. These words are also relevant and serve as a good reminder for Christian communities. On *Tikkun Olam*, see also Steve Gutow, “*Tikkun Olam*: A Public Policy Focus,” *Reconstructionist* 65 no.1 (2000): 46-53. For a more detailed and complete

The third hermeneutical principle of social ecology/ecojustice speaks of the interrelationship between ecology, economy, and politics. At the root of the ecological predicament, one also finds a deep socio-economic-political and ethical problem. That is, ecology and economics are intimately related, not only etymologically. Ecological justice and economic justice (the rules of the household) go hand in hand. Justice for the earth and all its inhabitants, that is, the earth community and justice among all of the earth's creatures are pivotal to sustain the integrity of the whole creation. Ecojustice theologians Hessel and Radford Ruether put it in eloquent fashion: "all beings on earth make up one household (*oikos*), which benefits from an economy (*oikonomia*) that takes ecological and social stewardship (*oikonomos*) seriously."⁷⁴⁹ Hence, politics –where the real battles are fought—constitutes, with all its ambiguities, a privileged instrument for concerted action that aims to eliminate injustice and achieve a just order in society. Anna L. Peterson expresses the idea in a simple and convincingly way when she argues that "Ecological destruction and social injustice are political problems that need political solutions, which mean structural, institutional changes. We cannot have societies of good people in conditions that make it hard to be good."⁷⁵⁰ Again here, as in the case of Jewett, no specific mention of the limitations and contradictions of the current globalized capitalist system is made.

exposition of the subject, see Gerald J. Blidstein, "Tikkun Olam", *Tradition* 29, no. 2 (1995): 5-43. Concerning the Covenanting process for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC), see my STM Thesis on the subject at Drew University (2001), as well as the issue of the *Ecumenical Review*, Volume 41, number 4, October 1989.

⁷⁴⁹ *Christianity and Ecology*, xxxvi.

⁷⁵⁰ "Talking the Walk: A Practice-Based Environmental Ethic as Grounds of Hope," in *ECOSPIRIT*, 56.

Are the tasks and responsibilities of humans beings overstated here? Are we not going back to an outdated version of anthropocentrism? Deep ecologists, such as Arne Naess, Robyn Eckersley, Guy diZerega, and John Clark, among others, have expressed concern about and reaction against the seemingly anthropocentrism reflected in such positions, defending points of view that, at times, seem closer to certain misanthropic conceptions.⁷⁵¹ It is necessary to briefly clarify the issue in order to proceed further. Anthropocentrism has been defined as “the belief that humans must be considered at the center of, and above any other aspect of reality.”⁷⁵² Human beings, one of the latecomer species on earth, are placed on top of the hierarchical pyramid.

The eighth hermeneutical principle of social ecology/ecojustice is concerned with equality and clearly speaks against domination and hierarchy. Bookchin himself responded to this critique clarifying the concept of Social Ecology as having basically an anti-hierarchical understanding of reality. He argues

that ecology recognizes no hierarchy on the level of the ecosystem. There are no “kings of the beasts” and no “lowly ants.” These notions are the projection of our own social attitudes and relationships on the natural world. Virtually all that lives as part of the floral and faunal variety of an ecosystem plays its coequal role in maintaining the balance and integrity of the whole.⁷⁵³

Elsewhere, Bookchin combines the ideas of ecology, hierarchy, domination of nature, and domination of humans by fellow humans. He claims that “The ecologically

⁷⁵¹ For a lively (albeit somewhat one-sided) treatment of this question, see Bookchin’s article “Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology,” *Socialist Review*, Vol. 18. No. 3, (1988): 9-29. See also Robyn Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), and Gus DiZerega, “Social Ecology, Deep Ecology, and Liberalism,” *Critical Review*, vol. 6, nos. 2-3 (1992): 1-41.

⁷⁵² See <http://en.Wikipedia.org>

⁷⁵³ Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*, 60.

destructive character of hierarchy and domination emerges from ideologies of the domination of nature that themselves spring from the real domination of human by human.”⁷⁵⁴

It is true that Social Ecology considers human beings as having a particular and unique responsibility and position *vis-à-vis* the rest of the natural (created) order (“first nature” in socioecological terms or “otherkind” as some ecojustice theologians prefer). On the same subject, Bookchin attempts to clarify the issue and acknowledges that

the human being is the bearer of moral responsibilities that do not exist in the realm of “first nature”. It is to acknowledge that if all life-forms have an “intrinsic worth” that should be respected, such an attribution is *exclusively* the product of human intellectual, moral, and aesthetic qualities – qualities that no other life-forms possesses. The “intrinsic worth” of human beings is thus patently exceptional, indeed extraordinary. It is only human beings that can even *formulate* the concept of ‘intrinsic worth’ and endow it with a sense of moral responsibility that no other life-form is capable of doing.⁷⁵⁵

Kevin O’Brien, from the perspective of the relationship between science and theology, seems to strike a middle way. He claims: “As the inclusion of human beings in cosmic dependence demonstrates, a Christian environmentalism ought not to become misanthropic, dismissing the value of human beings in order to emphasize the importance of the natural world.” On this point, he is in full agreement with the views upheld by Social Ecology. Nevertheless, he completes his understanding adding immediately: “The value of human

⁷⁵⁴ Murray Bookchin, *The Modern Crisis* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1986), 42.

⁷⁵⁵ Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 45.

communities, however, comes from our connection to the rest of creation, rather than from our distinctness.”⁷⁵⁶

A similar view is expressed by Byrne in his contribution to the collection of the Earth Bible Project. Byrne claims that in the text, one can perceive a dual vision with respect to the influence of human beings in the world. He contends that

The text certainly envisages a negative, exploitative anthropocentrism. But it also implies the possibility of a more positive pattern of human behavior. The more positive view remains anthropocentric in the sense of according to human beings a determining role in the world (which is, after all, factually the case). But it can hardly be called anthropocentric in a negative, self-regarding and exploitative sense.⁷⁵⁷

The Swiss Reformed Theologian, Lukas Vischer, also contributes to clarify the question of a supposedly anthropocentric understanding of the text. He makes a critical distinction between a position that assumes *anthropomonism* and another that assumes *anthropocentrism*. The former is the notion that God is exclusively concerned with humans in the process of salvation. Therefore, creation exists only as a background for the (basically human) history of salvation. By contrast, the latter affirms that human beings play a key role in the divine economy of salvation, while, at the same time, considers that “otherkind” is also destined “to obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). Nygren likewise observes that “the redemption of mankind (*sic*) is also to be the redemption of creation. For Paul, the two go

⁷⁵⁶ Kevin O’Brien, “Toward an Ethics of Biodiversity: Science and Theology in Environmentalist Dialogue,” in *ECOSPIRIT*, 186.

⁷⁵⁷ Byrne, “Creation Groaning,” 198.

hand in hand and are inseparably united.”⁷⁵⁸ As Hunt, Horrel, and Southgate convincingly argue,

It may be that a chastened and humble anthropocentrism can appropriately remain key to an ecological theology, not only because,... human beings evidently do, de facto, have “unique power to affect most of the rest of creation on this planet”, but also because it is human beings whom we address and to whom we look for responsible action in relation to creation’s future. Romans 8 might indeed provide interesting resources for such an ecological anthropocentrism, since it depicts creation, humanity, and the Spirit as conjoined in a chorus of hopeful groaning, and links creation’s hope with that of humanity, and specifically that of the “children of God.”⁷⁵⁹

Southgate, elsewhere, further expands the idea when he adds:

The story of creation, then, is a forward-looking story in which a tragic state is being transformed, with much suffering and struggle, *into one of liberation*. The reason for the tragic state is not given, nor are its causes analyzed, the focus, rather, is on the co-struggles of humans and nonhuman creation that lead to freedom and glory.⁷⁶⁰

Still there are more steps to take in this road: the challenge lies ahead of us.

The children of God are called to be co-workers with God for the good of all peoples and the earth. Sponheim puts it in an eloquent way when he acknowledges, “I join most Christians in believing that God wills and works to change things for the better and that the lives of Christians are to contribute to that change.”⁷⁶¹ For the Social Ecology pioneer, what need to be changed are not only the persons, but the very system in which they live. He does not hesitate to call a spade a spade. “Capitalism” he argues, “not only validates pre-capitalist notions of the domination of nature by man; it turns the plunder of nature into society’s law of life.”⁷⁶² Bookchin is

⁷⁵⁸ Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, 332.

⁷⁵⁹ Hunt, Horrel, and Southgate, “An Environmental Mantra?,” 575.

⁷⁶⁰ Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 94. Emphasis added.

⁷⁶¹ Paul R. Sponheim, *The Pulse of Creation: God and the Transformation of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), ix.

⁷⁶² Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*, 66.

convinced that the capitalist society -- whether liberal or state capitalism-- epitomizes the historical process of the development of hierarchy and domination. And as such, it needs a radical transformation, to the point that it needs to disappear.⁷⁶³ Elsewhere, he notes that “social ecology gave ecology a sharp revolutionary and political edge.”⁷⁶⁴

Southgate does not directly specifically engage politics or structural economic and social issues. His main concrete ethical proposals are the advocating of vegetarianism as “an eschatological sign” and the setting apart of reserves of biodiversity. Nevertheless, in order to be more specific, he dares to make -- in his own terms—“a bold proposal.” That is, “that as *a sign of our liberty as children of God starting to set free the whole creation would be that human beings, through a blend of prudential wisdom and scientific ingenuity, cut the rate of natural extinction.*”⁷⁶⁵ Furthermore, the British scholar cannot ignore the sociopolitical reality and comes to the following (timid?) conclusion: “I am not convinced that big capitalism as currently constructed will be an easy ally for a long term environmental ethics.”⁷⁶⁶ Southgate cites Norwegian deep ecologist and philosopher, Arne Naees, who believes that a “deep ecological” paradigm shift would require a transformation of “basic economic,

⁷⁶³ Bookchin comments about the intractable basic traits of the capitalist system as follows: “one might more easily persuade a green plant to desist of photosynthesis than to ask the bourgeois economy to desist from capital accumulation.” Ibid., 66.

⁷⁶⁴ “Reflections: An Overview of the Roots of Social Ecology,” *Harbinger*, Vol.3, no.1 (2003): 7.

⁷⁶⁵ Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 125 (italics original). The author is convinced that this important contribution has basically a theological reason. He claims that “There is no question but that our calling under God must be to reduce that anthropogenic extinction, and indeed endeavor to eliminate it.” Ibid., 125.

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid., 129.

technological and ideological structures.”⁷⁶⁷ Naess does not explicitly name the current capitalist system, but what else can be implied? Other non-theologians, artists and writers, seem to have no hesitation in naming the real root of the problem.⁷⁶⁸ David Pepper, a British critic of ecological movements and green political parties, analyzing the process of globalization of capitalism and its ensuing marginalization of the masses, is convinced that

⁷⁶⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁷⁶⁸ For instance, Michael Moore, the controversial USA filmmaker, develops a popular and eloquent critique of capitalism in his recent film *Capitalism: A Love Affair*. Rich Stockwell, a journalist covering a free health clinic for the poor and uninsured people in New Orleans on November 14-15, 2009, argues that “They are victims of a system built with corporate profits at its center which long ago forgot the moral imperative that should drive us to show compassion to our fellow men and women....It’s about fairness and justice in a system that knows none. I’d defy even the most hardened capitalist-loving-conservative to do what I did on Saturday and continue to pretend that the system in place now is working.” See www.mnsbc.msn.com/id/33975919. December 9, 2009. Furthermore, David Pepper, in a book written on the wake of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, claims that “the capitalistic mode of production itself -- the pyramid of productive forces surmounted by productive relations which constitute capitalism-- is to be blamed for the environmental damage, and not just ‘greed’, or perhaps Christianity or patriarchy... Capitalism is inherently environmentally unfriendly.” See David Pepper, *Eco- Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice* (London: Routledge, 1993), 91. To do justice to his ideas, Pepper also recognizes, for example, the disastrous environmental results of policies implemented by Stalin to maximize the production on the collectives (120-121). Moreover, Pepper cites J. O’Connor, who also affirms that “massive environmental degradation is probably not inherent in socialism as it appears to be in capitalism, although no socialist country has yet demonstrated this proposition” (126). For a general analysis of the capitalist system and its relation with the ecological predicament, see the article of Uruguayan theologian and social scientist, Julio de Santa Ana, “The Present Socio-Economic System as a Cause of Ecological Imbalance and Poverty,” in *Ecology and Poverty: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo (London: SCM Press, 1995), 3-11. See also Arjun Makhijani, *From Global Capitalism to Economic Justice: An Inquiry into the Elimination of Systemic Poverty, Violence and Environmental Destruction in the World* (New York: Apex Press, 1996). Makhijani refers to the capitalist system as the “global apartheid system.” A serious eco-socialist critique can also be found in US Green Party leader, Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World* (New York: Zed Books, 2002). For a critique of the religious aspects of the market economy, see also Harvey Cox, “Mammon and the Culture of the Market: A Socio-Theological Critique,” in *Liberating Faith: Religious Voices for Justice, Peace and Ecological Wisdom*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb, 274-283 (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

“these twin evils of social injustice and environmental degradation will continue to grow, even though most people recognize them as evils, for there is no prospect that their present root causes in the economics and politics of capitalism will be radically examined and tackled.”⁷⁶⁹

Social Ecology endeavors to overcome the existing structures of hierarchy and domination of class and gender, and proposes an ecological society. This new ecological society has several hallmarks: it is an egalitarian society, and it is based on mutual aid, caring and communitarian values. In a real democratic society, people’s responsible participation contributes to justice and well-being for all. Interestingly, the Jewish cultural critic Daniel Boyarin, in turn, claims that Paul is “a passionate striver for human liberation and equality.”⁷⁷⁰ Elsewhere, Boyarin, who reads Paul as a Jewish social and cultural critic, argues that “Paul was primarily motivated by what is essentially a social vision of human unity or sameness, *one that would eradicate all difference and thus hierarchy*.”⁷⁷¹ How do these two statements coming from a religious scholar relate to one of the basic tenets of social ecology? Is Bookchin’s Jewish background somehow obliquely reflected here? The hierarchical system of the ancient Mediterranean culture was strict and played a clear role in the lives of the people. At social level, Roman citizens were divided into several classes, both by ancestry and by property, and there were also non citizens with different legal rights, and slaves, with no rights at all. As Judith Perkins

⁷⁶⁹ David Pepper, *Eco- Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2.

⁷⁷⁰ See Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 9.

⁷⁷¹ Daniel Boyarin, “Paul and the Genealogy of Gender,” in *A Feminist Companion to Paul*, ed. Levine with Blickenstaff, 17. Note 11. Emphasis mine.

reminds, “The hierarchical thinking of ancient culture consigned many humans to animal status...”⁷⁷² Moreover, a certain dualistic philosophy (platonization) set up another kind of hierarchical opposition: the visible reality (*ktisis*) was seen as inferior to the invisible reality, which the former poorly reflects. Anthropologically, it follows that another hierarchy was clearly established: the soul is of a higher essence than the body, which was usually denigrated.⁷⁷³

Boyarin, in his illuminating comparative study of the letters to the Galatians and to the Corinthians, is, nonetheless, adamant in his claim concerning Paul. He underlines that “the major motivating force behind Paul’s ministry was a profound vision of a humanity undivided by ethnos, class, and sex.”⁷⁷⁴ This is a compelling assertion that is also meaningful when applied to the Paul of Romans.

Galatians 3:28-29 is—according to Boyarin-- Paul’s strongest expression of cultural criticism. “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Despite ambiguities and apparent contradictions, he recognizes that the apostle “seems, indeed, to be wiping out social differences and hierarchies between the genders in addition to those that obtain between ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes...”⁷⁷⁵ Jewett seems to go on the same direction of Boyarin when he argues that Paul, in his admonition in Romans 15:7,

⁷⁷² Judith Perkins, “Animal Voices,” *Religion and Theology* 12 (3-4 2005): 385.

⁷⁷³ Boyarin admits that Paul’s dualism “does not radically devalue the body, but nevertheless presupposes a hierarchy of spirit and body.” See “Paul and the Genealogy of Gender,” 20.

⁷⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God,” aims to replace “imperialistic habits of exclusion and domination.”⁷⁷⁶ In Romans and in contrast to the official propaganda and common understanding, Paul argues that the restoration of creation is not to be accomplished by the representative of the imperial power. On the contrary, and in order to find meaning and overcome futility, “creation is waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the *huioi tou theou*.”⁷⁷⁷

“The creation waits with eager longing,” repeats Paul. What are the implications of the revealing of the children of God in this active participation and engagement of human beings? Bookchin remind his readers that

...if human beings are indeed moral agents because natural evolution confers upon them a clear responsibility toward the natural world, their unique attributes cannot be emphasized too strongly. For it is by virtue of this uniqueness, this capacity to think conceptually and feel a deep empathy for the world of life, that makes possible for humanity in an ecological society to reverse the devastation it has inflicted on the biosphere.⁷⁷⁸

Perhaps this is part of what creation is longing for. Will the children of God be revealed and stand the test? While this issue goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, the revealing of the children of God can also be described as part of a forward movement (mission). In the last chapter, I made a series of strong critical remarks concerning a particular imperial(istic) understanding of

⁷⁷⁶ Robert Jewett, “Response: Exegetical Support for Romans and Other Letters,” in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 2000), 61.

⁷⁷⁷ In this context, it is worth to remember that in the terminology of Social Ecology, libertarian municipalism is a political way of organizing society that is nurtured by a strong suspicion of the consequences of the centralization of power. It is fundamentally people’s participation which can make the difference. Indeed, this may not be the only way to change the unjust patterns of society, but at least it is presented as a feasible proposal, a way to continue to find the way.

⁷⁷⁸ *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 187.

mission, particularly as it was manifest in Latin America. Now, I would like to rescue a concept of mission that tries to respond in justice to the current ecological predicament. This has to be a comprehensive mission, in the best sense of the meaning, from all peoples to all peoples and the earth. If one understands the church as the *people of God*, then, the revealing is an expression of the *missio Dei*, a mission that can transform individuals, transform communities, and transform the world. This is hope (*elpis*) for the liberation of the whole creation.⁷⁷⁹ Uruguayan scholar, Juan Luis Segundo, see this mission as projects, and claims that they “have to do with collaborating in God’s ‘construction’ or ‘cultivation’ work.” “This is Paul’s way”—he adds—“of expressing God’s plan to humanize humanity that is called the ‘kingdom of God’ in the Synoptic Gospels.”⁷⁸⁰

“Creation was subject to futility” (*matatíotêti*) (v. 20)

Most commentators call attention to the word *matatíotêti*, usually translated as “futility” or “vanity.” The word and its derivatives appear eleven times in the New

⁷⁷⁹ It is fitting to point here to the article of a minister who has been sent by his Church as a “missionary to the environment.” I am referring to Rev. Fletcher Harper. His article “Religion and the Earth on the Ground: The Experience of Greenfaith in New Jersey,” *ECOSPIRIT*, 504-516, is a compelling example of a committed and relevant multifaith initiative. In November 2009, Harper was one of the thirty-one religious leaders honored in an interfaith meeting held at Windsor Castle in London under the theme *Many Heavens One Earth*. Other interesting examples can be found in Laurel Kearns, “Cooking the Truth: Faith, Science, the Market and Global Warming,” *ibid.*, 97-124. See also the positive assessment of mission to the environment in the last chapter of Celia Deanne-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*.

⁷⁸⁰ Juan Luis Segundo, *The Humanistic Christology of Paul* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 136.

Testament.⁷⁸¹ Dunn argues that “*mataiotēs* denotes the futility of an object which does not function as it was designed to, or, more precisely, an object which has been given a role for which it was not designed and which is unreal or illusory.”⁷⁸² Bauer *et al* acknowledge that *mataiotēs* means “‘frustration’. It has the sense of being ‘without result’ (*maten*), ineffective’, ‘not reaching its end’.”⁷⁸³ But the semiotic field can be extended and may also mean emptiness, purposelessness, meaninglessness, vacuousness, ineffectiveness, alienation, something that is hollow, vain, aimlessness, that has non-sense. It could even mean nothingness. One can be tempted to say that what we have here is a proto-expression of the second law of thermodynamics (i.e. the increase of entropy.)

Most scholars are convinced that the text alludes to the narrative of the fall (Gen. 3. 17-18). For those who would like to place the myth in a “once upon a time historical moment” or take it literally, Holmes Rolston III, a philosopher and biologist, indeed problematizes it. He comes with a response that may be disappointing. He sees the question from a totally different perspective and argues that

...if a biologist begins reading Genesis, the opening story seems incredible. The trouble is not so much the six days of creation in chapters 1 and 2 ... as in chapter 3, where, spoiling the Garden Earth, the first couple fall and Earth becomes cursed... when a once-paradisiacal nature becomes recalcitrant as a punishment for human sin. That does not fit into the biological paradigm at all. Suffering in a

⁷⁸¹ Matthew 15:9; Mark 7:7; Acts 14:15; Romans 8:20; I Corinthians 3:20; I Corinthians 15:17; Ephesians 4:17; Titus 3:9; James 1:26; I Peter 1:18 and II Peter 2:18.

⁷⁸² James D .G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids / Cambridge, U.K.: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing House, 1998), 100; 470. Cobb and Lull are of the same opinion, *Romans* (St. Louis, Missouri, Chalice Press, 2005), 123, as is Jewett, “The Corruption and Redemption of Creation,” 37.

⁷⁸³ Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt and F. William Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 621.

harsh world did not enter chronologically after sin and on account of it. There was struggle for long epochs before the human arrival, however problematic the arrival of sinful humans may also be... Nature is prolific and fertile enough This calls for a respect for life, perhaps even a reverence for life. But nature is also where the fittest survive..., fierce and indifferent, a scene of hunger, disease, death. And nature is what it is regardless of human moral failings, indeed regardless of humans at all.⁷⁸⁴

Furthermore, Rolston does not hesitate to state that “The biologist is also sure that whatever nature is, its fundamental character has nothing to do with human sinfulness. Human sin did not throw nature out of joint; nature does not need to be redeemed on that account.”⁷⁸⁵

Human sinfulness expresses itself historically. It takes different forms and shapes that vary according to the times. Broken human relationships and exploitation deeply affect all human beings, and finally also the earth, which is subjected to futility. Jewett brings to mind the *somber dictum* of Ecclesiastes 1:2: “Vanity of vanities, Says the Teacher/Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”⁷⁸⁶ Jewett believes that Paul is referring to the basic idea that the human refusal to accept limitations ruins the world. What is Jewett referring to? Just to the human *hubris* and greed? Again, we need to move beyond individualistic understandings. Perhaps it is precisely here that one can find a clue to the problem of an economic and social system which is based in the search for unlimited growth and unlimited consumption. This is a kind of growth and consumption that favors a small percentage of the world’s population at the expense of the poor... and of the earth. The way human beings relate to each other and act, as well as the social and economic systems they

⁷⁸⁴ Holmes Rolston III, “Does Nature Need to be Redeemed?” *Zygon* 29, no 2 (June 1994): 206.

⁷⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁷⁸⁶ *Mataiotes* is the word the Septuagint uses to translate the Hebrew word, *hebel*.

build are inextricably linked as two faces of the same coin. Finally, a model that promotes unlimited growth ends up annihilating the very purpose of the creation, and exhausts its resources in the service of the few.

The Hebrew Bible also makes reference to the close relationship between the way people deal with people and the way people deal with the earth. In Isaiah 24, the judgment on the earth (v.1), on the people (v.2), and on the powerful of the earth, “the kings of the earth” (v.21b), are closely knitted together. The inhabitants of the Earth have “transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant” (v.5b). Therefore, “the earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled” (v.3), is devoured by a curse (v.6), “dries up and withers” (v.4), and “lies polluted” (v.5a). Similarly, Hosea 4: 1-3 paints a picture of broken relationships among humans -- “no faithfulness or loyalty...swearing, lying and murder...stealing and adultery... bloodshed follows bloodshed” --and what results from it: “Therefore, the land mourns....” Ecological exploitation and pollution makes the land to mourn and wither. The earth loses its purpose and meaning, becomes futile, pointless, wasted, fruitless, in Paul’s words, *mataiotês*.

With such traditions in mind, concludes Jewett, “ Paul’s audience could well have thought about how imperial ambitions, military conflicts, and economic exploitation had led to the erosion of the natural environment throughout the Mediterranean world , leaving ruined cities, depleted fields, deforested mountains, and polluted streams as evidence of this universal human vanity.”⁷⁸⁷ We can refer at this point to Pepper’s reflections on these relationships. He follows the line of social ecologists and adamantly argues

⁷⁸⁷ Jewett, “The Corruption and Redemption of Creation”, 37.

that “Class relations are the source of economic, social and political exploitation, and these, in turn, are what lead to ecological exploitation and damage.”⁷⁸⁸ Futility, vanity, and sheer alienation are the result of such senseless way of (dis)organizing society.

Segundo also interprets this verse in ways close to a social ecology reading. He sees that *mataiotes* may also mean something that is left unfinished. He relates this idea with verse 17: the witness of being *heirs*. He argues that “being ‘heir’ does not mean inheriting something already acquired. It means inheriting something immensely worthwhile *to do*.”⁷⁸⁹ To use an agrarian/ecological metaphor, we need to plough in fertile soil furrows of hope, where seeds can be planted and eventually grow. In the seeds of justice, the promise of the possibility of another world is present and in a process of gestation. This is indeed an opportunity, a future oriented task for the *huoi tou theou* in order to reverse the meaninglessness and senseless of exploitation and misuse.

Jewett comments on the meaning of “not of its own will” (*ouch ekousa*) and argues that “it is the human race that remains responsible for the defacing of the ecosystem.”⁷⁹⁰ Byrne calls this opinion a “minority opinion,” although in his view, a well founded one. The Australian scholar claims that “we can validly find in this text an allusion to the evil consequences that ensue for the

⁷⁸⁸ Pepper, *Eco- Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice*, 207.

⁷⁸⁹ Segundo, *The Humanistic Christology of Paul*, 137. Emphasis original. It is to be noted that in an endnote, Segundo synthesizes an issue with which I fully concur. He claims that “[E]xegetes debate the identity of ‘the one who subjected’ creation to uselessness: God, Satan, Adam, or humanity. It does not matter for our purposes here. The point is that in any case God has left creation dependent on human decision, and that only the glorious manifestation of the freedom of God’s children will restore to creation its usefulness” (215).

⁷⁹⁰ Jewett, *Romans*, 514.

non-human world when selfishness, greed and exploitation, rather than creative responsibility, mark human behavior on this planet.”⁷⁹¹ This position in principle is correct. Nevertheless, certain qualifications are needed. We need immediately to bring to mind Bookchin’s story of the black child facing the mirror at the museum exhibit. Yes, humanity has the great responsibility, but not all its members share *equal* responsibility. Nevertheless, the challenge to all its members remains: mutually supporting and sustainable just relations will definitely contribute for creation to find its meaning and sense. Why is this so? Note that in the text, *mataiotes* is not the final word. The final word is *elpidi*, from *elpis*, hope (see further below, D.3.) A word impregnated with meaning which opens up the future, and which constitutes the axis of the text. German scholar, Guenther Bornkamm, calls it “the banner.”⁷⁹² What we have now and what is known to us is never the final reality. Creation is a continuous creation, opening up new possibilities, and is, therefore, *creatio nova*.⁷⁹³ And we, humans, are continuously marching. This is what constitutes our very *raison d’etre*. We struggle to find the path because we are convinced that it is possible to push the horizon even further. There are no predefined paths. There is always the need to creatively search for them.⁷⁹⁴ This search entails political and social commitment, because the paths are steps to build a new, meaningful, purposeful, sustainable and just society, in a nutshell, a better place to live for us and for the future generations. This search is also a search

⁷⁹¹ Byrne, *Creation Groaning*, 199.

⁷⁹² Guenther Bornkamm, *Paul*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1969), 225.

⁷⁹³ See Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 207ff.

⁷⁹⁴ Beautifully expressed by the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado: “*Caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar*.” English translation: “Walker, there is no path. Paths are made by walking.”

for life in all its fullness. As Westerholm argues, “That life –all life—is meaningful and good, and that evil distorts and disrupts the good and cries out to be set right: these convictions are fundamental to the ‘Jewish-Christian’ worldview.”⁷⁹⁵ This search and engagement receive their thrust-- in the words of Bookchin-- from the utopia, “because we can no longer afford to do without utopian thinking. The crisis are too serious and the possibilities too sweeping to be resolved by customary modes of thought...,”⁷⁹⁶ as described by the fifth principle of ecojustice/social ecology. In the words of Paul, it is moved by hope, a hope for freedom and liberation and to overcome *mataiotes*.

Creation will be set free (*eleutherōthēsetai*) from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom (*eleutherian*) of the glory of the children of God (v 21)

Hahne believes that this verse “represents the climax of this section. It describes the glorious future to which creation looks forward.”⁷⁹⁷ Paul’s statement is indeed an affirmation of hope. The present reality is not the final word, it is not the plan God has for God’s good creation. There is always a future ahead of us, a future of liberation from futility, oppression, and captivity. In a compelling essay, Marie Turner provides a very important hermeneutical key when she argues that: “[W]hen Paul speaks of hope, he means the hope of life.”⁷⁹⁸ Furthermore, from the perspective of Wisdom, she

⁷⁹⁵ Westerholm, *Preface to the Study of Paul*, 9. It is to be noted that Westerholm qualifies the phrase “Jewish-Christian” to limit the term in a technical sense which he subsequently explains.

⁷⁹⁶ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 41.

⁷⁹⁷ Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 193.

⁷⁹⁸ Turner, “God’s Design,” 171.

claims that “hope is not the hope of salvation from sin as it has usually been understood when seen in the light of Genesis, but the hope of life.”⁷⁹⁹ The fourth hermeneutical principle of ecojustice/social ecology reminds us of the pivotal importance of the defense of life, confronted with a socioeconomic and social system that is necrophilic, that is, a system that is geared to produce death and not life. Confronted with the reality of the number of children that die every year of preventable/social diseases, such as malnutrition, malaria or diarrhea, the hope for life, and the struggle for life become an urgent necessity, an unavoidable responsibility.⁸⁰⁰ The hope for life ‘in all its fullness’ for the whole creation is the basic content of the (Christian) message of liberation and freedom. This is the promise announced in the text: freedom for creation and freedom for the children of God. Bookchin describes elsewhere some of the features of Social Ecology that are relevant in this context. He claims that

Social ecology, in effect, stands at odds with the notion that culture alone is the realm of freedom. Indeed, it tries to root the cultural in the natural and to ascertain the gradations that unite them.... The power of social ecology lies in the association it establishes between society and ecology, the social conceived as a fulfillment of the latent dimension of freedom in nature, and the ecological conceived as the organizing principle of social development – in short, the guidelines for an ecological society.⁸⁰¹

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid., 169.

⁸⁰⁰ According to the World Health Organization, a child dies of malaria every 30 seconds. See www.WHO.int/media_center/factsheets/fs094. UNICEF states that “Diarrhoeal diseases account for nearly 2 million death a year among children under five years of age, making them the second cause of child death worldwide.” See <http://www.UNICEF.org/health/diarrhoea>.

⁸⁰¹ Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 118.

According to Jewett, this particular verse “takes up a significant theme in Jewish prophetism and apocalypticism.”⁸⁰² The prophet Isaiah, I Enoch, the Testament of Levi, and the Sibylline Oracles, are part of that Jewish tradition of a messianic restoration of creation. One can bring to mind here particularly the text of the Sibylline Oracles (3.744-745, 750-751). It announces that the earth will once again become “the universal mother who will give to mortals her best fruit in countless store of corn, wine and oil...And the cities shall be full of good things and the fields rich.”⁸⁰³ Again we have here the feminine imagery of the caring mother, one which is able to generously provide not only for individuals, but also for cities and fields

The promise of freedom for creation and for human beings can be interpreted both a gift and a task. Southgate, a theologian, timidly claims that reading the text “would suggest that the working out of the freedom of the children of God will be to do with humans having some part in the healing of the evolutionary process....”⁸⁰⁴ Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, a politician, takes a more daring and concrete step. In her speech on the occasion of the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, she said that “*la libertad no surge sola, hay que luchar.*”⁸⁰⁵

What would the promise for freedom concretely entail? Here we may start to dream dreams, to dare to express the utopia needed, and to follow its vision.

⁸⁰² Jewett, “The Corruption and Redemption of Creation”, 38.

⁸⁰³ As cited in *ibid.*, 39.

⁸⁰⁴ Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 96.

⁸⁰⁵ As reported by the Spanish newspaper *El País*, on November 9, 2009. See [http://www.el pais.com/global/](http://www.elpais.com/global/). “Freedom does not appear out of nothing. One has to struggle to obtain it.” Translation mine.

Name it the Kingdom of God or the ecological society, the utopia enlarges the horizon and gives content to the hope. Bookchin also called the ecological society “ecotopia”. He made a strong plea for the need to sustain a utopia in critical times such as this. He claims

In this confluence of social and ecological crisis, we can no longer afford to be unimaginative; we can no longer afford to do without utopian thinking. The crisis are too serious and the possibilities too sweeping to be resolved by customary modes of thought -- the very sensibility that produced these crises in the first place-- ... so ‘if we don’t do the impossible, we shall be faced with the unthinkable.’ ⁸⁰⁶

In a nutshell, the utopia is the re-encounter between human beings and nature. Gudynas, elsewhere, speaks of this utopia as “a mobilizing utopia.” ⁸⁰⁷ The struggle for freedom and liberation is a continuous struggle. When one hurdle is overcome, the next is already in sight, and when new protagonists participate, they are able to generate a new and changing agenda.

In a rather minimalist but very down to earth way, Funk argues that “the messiah we need is some random act of kindness, some bold proposal to close the hole in the ozone, some discrete move to introduce candor into politics, some new intensive care for the planet. Perhaps the messiah will come when we have broken bread with our enemies.” ⁸⁰⁸ A Latin American social ecologist argues that

⁸⁰⁶ *The Ecology of Freedom*, 41.

⁸⁰⁷ Eduardo Gudynas, “Ecology from the Viewpoint of the Poor,” in *Ecology and Poverty: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, 108.

⁸⁰⁸ Robert W. Funk, “The Once and Future Jesus,” in *The Once and Future Jesus /The Jesus Seminar*, ed. John S. Spong (Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 2000), 5-25, here 21.

Social ecology must encourage those practices that give way to new styles of development, styles that do not consist in the accumulation of resources by the few or the consideration of human beings as mere resources to be used. Moreover, it should also consider that the resources must be used to benefit the majority, and not only the current ones, but also the future generations.⁸⁰⁹

Once more, the seventh hermeneutical principle of ecojustice/Social Ecology becomes relevant here. The correlation between the exploitation of humans by humans and the exploitation of creation by humans brings results in enslavement, bondage, frustration, and injustice for all created beings. The promise is the transformation and elimination of such distorted relations. The acceptance of such a promise and the decision to actively intervene for its realization is the very *program* of Social Ecology mentioned earlier. Jewett argues in this context that “[O]vercoming ecological disorder is depicted here as a divine gift enacted as a result of God’s restoration of humanity to its position of rightful dominion, reflecting God’s intended glory.”⁸¹⁰ Not only is there need, however, to overcome ecological disaster. Jewett again falls short of following the argument to its fuller expression. There is also a fundamental need to overcome the unjust social and economic situation in which people live. The freedom of creation is correlated to the freedom of the glory of the children of God. If the children of God are still captives to a system that dehumanizes, enslaves, and oppresses, the overcoming of the ecological disaster perhaps will not only be partial, but really impossible. Hahne prefers to use the word “solidarity” to express the interrelationship. He convincingly

⁸⁰⁹ Eduardo Gudynas and G. Evia *La Praxis por la Vida: Introducción a las Metodologías de la Ecología Social*, 100.

⁸¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

concludes that “[T]he suffering and glory shared by believers and the rest of creation presupposes a solidarity between humanity and the rest of creation.”⁸¹¹

The third principle of eco justice/social ecology speaks of the close interrelationships between ecology, economics, and politics. A wider perspective is needed to effectively produce corrective actions leading to freedom and fulfillment--a perspective that is multidimensional, and which includes also the social, religious, spiritual, and cultural facets of the relationships between humans and between human and the earth. This has been described in the ecumenical movement and in liberation theological circles as the need to embrace a “spirituality for combat,” that is, a spirituality that embodies a firm and militant conviction and engagement for the struggle toward a society without injustices and exploitation, a society where freedom, justice, and peace can cohabit.⁸¹²

The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains (*sustenatsei kai synōdinei*) ...and not only the creation, but we ourselves...groan inwardly (*stenatsomen*) (vs. 22, 23)

⁸¹¹ Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 173.

⁸¹² See the description of spirituality as offered by the well-known Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar: “Spirituality is the way a person understands his or her own *ethically and religiously committed existence*, and the way he or she *acts and reacts* habitually for this understanding” (emphasis mine). In Roger Haight, “Spirituality and Social Justice: A Christological Perspective,” in *Spirituality Today*, Vol. 34, no 4 (1982): 312-325; here, 312. Indian theologian M.J. Joseph claims that the expression Spirituality for Combat also “has been applied by several Indian theologians to the spirituality that is needed today if Christianity is to be involved in the problems of society and relevant to the struggle of the poor and oppressed for liberation.” See “Spirituality for Combat,” in *Religion and Society* 25, (March 1978): 55-69.

Jewett observes that “[T]he idea that the earth ‘languishes,’ ‘mourns,’ and suffers ‘pollution’ under the burden of human exploitation also appears in Isa.24:4-7 and Hosea 4:1-3.”⁸¹³ The groaning of creation deepens its eager longing expressed in v 19. The groans and the birth pains open space for the new to happen. New life is born, in the midst of suffering. A new and liberated creation is starting to take shape. Sutter Rehman remarks that *apolytrōsis* means to purchase the freedom of enslaved people,⁸¹⁴ and therefore, can be equated with liberation. Furthermore, she argues that in the apocalyptic description that Paul provides, “is both heard and interpreted as a *sign of the coming change*.”⁸¹⁵ This change does come without effort. For Sutter Rehman Paul’s vision “is related to great, hard work, and intensive engagement, which in Rom 8.26 he calls Spirit-caused birthing.”⁸¹⁶ The language brings to mind the story of the people of Israel (Exodus 2:23-24) and their groaning for liberation from slavery and exploitation in Egypt. At this stage in Paul’s thought, it is creation which groans.

Pachamama,⁸¹⁷ mother earth, is groaning. Hundreds of species at the edge of extinction continue to groan today. The majestic trees of the tropical forests groan, like the Spirit, “with sighs too deeps for words” (Rom 8.26). The oceans, the lakes, the rivers, and the air groan, as they are polluted and become dangerous for fauna, flora

⁸¹³ Jewett, “The Corruption and Redemption of Creation,” 41.

⁸¹⁴ Sutter Rehman, “To turn the Groaning into Labor,” 77. Buschel argues that *lytrōsis*, translated as “liberation by ransom,” usually means “redemption.” See *Lyo ktl*, in Gerhard Kittel, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. IV, 352.

⁸¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 82. Emphasis original.

⁸¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 83. Emphasis original.

⁸¹⁷ *Pachamama* is the name given by the Inca people to the goddess representing the earth. Interestingly, *Pachamama* is also the name of a non-profit organization which has a two-fold mission: to preserve the Earth’s tropical rainforests by empowering the indigenous peoples who are its natural custodians, and to contribute to the creation of a new global vision of equity and sustainability for all. See <http://www.pachamama.org/content/view/2/4/>.

and people alike. Paul adds in vs 23 *ou monon de alla kai autoi*. The solidarity and interrelationship between human beings and the rest of creation appears clearly again.

The great majority of the peoples of the earth echo today the groaning of the earth. They are witness of the massive abuse and destruction of life in the world today. The inhabitants of the Pacific nations of Tuvalu and Kiribati groan because the effect of climate change and the raising of the level of the ocean will make their islands disappear.⁸¹⁸ Millions of children are groaning. They are almost without strength or they are suffering from preventable diseases and starvation, but their cries are still audible. Their parents are groaning, unable to bring food to their tables, either because the land is more and more infertile or because they are unemployed and lack the basic resources for their subsistence.⁸¹⁹ The indigenous populations of the planet groan intensively. Their ancestors' lands have been taken away from them or are being ruthlessly exploited and left desolate. The landless peasants also groan,

⁸¹⁸ See the *Otin Taai* Declaration of the Pacific Churches- Consultation on Climate Change, March 2004, endorsed by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches held in Geneva, 15-22 February 2005. See also the full declaration of the Chiang Mai consultation on "Poverty, Wealth and Ecology," supporting the Oceania Churches' Initiative, which plans for resettlement of the population of several Pacific Islands. The consultation was held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, November 2-6, 2009, and was sponsored by the World Council of Churches' AGAPE (Alternative to Economic Globalization Addressing Peoples and the Earth) Program. <http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=7285>. Since 2001, seventy five persons from Tuvalu have been moving every year to New Zealand in order to evacuate the island, as part of the plan of resettlement agreed by the two governments.

⁸¹⁹ Brazilian theologian and social activist Frei Betto in an article entitled *Hambre de Justicia* (Hunger for Justice) calls the attention to the fact that there are 950 million people threatened by chronic hunger. He comments on the decision taken by the leaders of the G-8 in their meeting in June 2009 in Italy, to free fifteen billion US dollars to combat hunger in the world. This sum represents no more than 0,0001% of the total amount liberated for bail-outs and support of the financial markets between September 2008 and June 2009. Reported by *Prensa Ecu mica* on July 28, 2009. See www.Ecupress.com.ar

longing for the end of their exploitation. The millions of forced refugees and migrants, displaced by economic or ecological crisis, or by war, groan in search for a new place which they can call home. Battered and abused women and children groan. They dream of a safe environment where to live and enjoy life in its fullness. The groaning of those marginalized, oppressed, and discriminated against for their ethnic origin, their gender or their sexual orientation becomes stronger and more perceptible. Differently-abled people groan and cry against discrimination and for full participation in the life of society.⁸²⁰ The homeless in our cities groan in search of a roof and a warm meal. And the list goes on and on. The workers that receive one dollar a day for twelve hard hours of labor groan for human and decent working conditions. Women and children that are victims of human trafficking groan for a safe haven and liberation. Particularly audible are the groaning of the poor women, who, according to Ivone Gebara, are today the poorest of the poor.⁸²¹ We can also hear the groans of those whose lives are empty, void of any sense or meaning, and their only refuge are drugs or utter solitude. “And what more should I say?” (Heb11.32). These people know well the meaning of “the sufferings of this present time” (Rom 8.18), the time of the seemingly absence of God. And they are millions, as numerous as the grains of sand in the

⁸²⁰ See “A Church of ALL and for ALL- An Interim Statement issued by EDAN, the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network. EDAN’s purpose is to advocate for the inclusion, participation, and active involvement of persons with disabilities in the spiritual, social and development life in church and society. See <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/unity-mission-evangelism-and-spirituality/just-and-inclusive-communities-people-with-disabilities-EDAN.html>.

⁸²¹ Concerning the poor women, Gebara claims that “She is the other: bleeding and burdened, housewife, mother, daughter, wife. She is both subject and object of our option for the poor.” As cited in María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life*, 113.

immense desert of human hopelessness.⁸²² Atahualpa Yupanqui, a notable Argentinian popular protest composer, and singer, poetically tells of his, and his people's, stories of suffering, poverty, and wandering. He writes

La sangre tiene razones
que hacen engordar las venas
Pena sobre pena y pena
hacen que uno pegue el grito
la arena es un puñadito
pero hay montañas de arena...

El trabajo es cosa buena
Es lo mejor de la vida;
Pero la vida es perdida
trabajando en campo ajeno
Unos trabajan de trueno
y es para otros la llovida..

Tal vez otro habrá rodado
tanto como he rodado yo,
y le juro, creamelo,
que he visto tanta pobreza,
que yo pensé con tristeza:
*Dios por aquí no pasó.*⁸²³

Mark Wallace seems to include divinity in the groaning of creation. God is in a deep empathy with God's whole creation. He argues that "[G]od also suffers deeply from the agony of inhabiting a planet badly degraded and out of harmony with itself."⁸²⁴

⁸²² For a different and meaningful reading of the groaning in the Pauline text, see Ivone Gebara, "El gemido de la creación y nuestros gemidos," *Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana (RIBLA)* 21 (1995): 35-45. The Brazilian theologian argues for the importance of starting from the local reality, the daily life ("lo cotidiano"), from our own bodies, in the search for a new collective understanding of social justice.

⁸²³ <http://www.cancioneros.com/nc/2180/0/coplas-del-payador-perseguido-atahualpa-yupanqui>. Emphasis mine.

⁸²⁴ Mark I. Wallace, "Sacred-Lands Theology: Green Spirit, Deconstruction, and the Question of Idolatry in Contemporary Earthen Christianity," *ECOSPIRIT*, 313.

But this bleak and rather depressing picture is not the final reality. Because the groans are groans of labor pain, “sign of the coming change” --to use the words of Sutter Rehman-- or the “hope of what we do not see” --to use Paul’s words-- a new life of freedom is promised for all creation and for human beings (*eleutherothêsetai, apolytrôsin*). Finally, hope is the winner, because *panta synergei eis agathon* (v. 28).

Hahne argues that “[T]he birth-pangs metaphor refers to intense and prolonged pain that leads to a joyous and positive outcome. It is a bipolar metaphor combining pain and a positive future outcome.”⁸²⁵ Furthermore, he sees in this text that “the birth-pangs metaphor shows that the groaning and suffering of creation will not be in vain...But the metaphor interprets the groaning of creation as a hopeful sign that glorious changes are soon coming to the world. Birth pangs are productive pain resulting in new life.”⁸²⁶

Walter Brueggemann views the Pauline text as part of the world of *anguish and expectation*.⁸²⁷ In his opinion, this world centers around three key words: cry/shout/groan. In an interesting way, the Hebrew Bible scholar introduces the notion of relinquishment in the transition from the old to the new. He argues that “The move from an old creation marked by rapacious acquisitiveness to the new world of justice, mercy, compassion, peace, security is one that in socio-economic, political terms necessitates renunciation,

⁸²⁵ Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 202.

⁸²⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁸²⁷ Walter Brueggemann, “The Matrix of Groan,” *Journal for Preachers* 24, no 3, (Easter 2001): 41-47.

repentance, yielding, and ceding of what has been.”⁸²⁸ Bruegemann is engaging an audience in the so-called “developed world,” those who are basically privileged by the system. Groaning applies to them too, because the “groan is the gate to the future of God’s new creation.”⁸²⁹ Furthermore, he claims that “...the new creation, from the human side, is a network of care that requires the end of domination and exploitation, the end of controlling truth and monopolies of certitude, the end of an oil-based comfort that makes every day one of ease, comfort, extravagance, and self-indulgence.”⁸³⁰

Indeed for those who belong to the privileged minority (around 20% of the population which consumes more than 80% of the earth resources) and who currently benefit from the unjust situation, the need to “give up,” to relinquish, become a must. In the very words of Bruegemann, it will be “a renunciation of economic, political dimension that will be experienced as deep loss and that will evoke deep groans of a quite concrete, practical kind.”⁸³¹ These are strong words coming from a contemporary prophet. Perhaps his readers/ hearers would echo the disciples’ words: “This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?” (John 6.60). Wallace seems to respond positively to the challenge. He acknowledges that “[W]e feel the weight of this crisis, and we sense the Spirit alive within each of us, moaning our pain and yearning for the renewal of a green, healthy, vibrant planet.”⁸³²

⁸²⁸ Ibid., 44

⁸²⁹ Ibid., 45. Bruegemann gets as concrete as he can, and makes reference to specific details of the western way of life calling the attention to the costly dimensions which are involved in the changes needed.

⁸³⁰ Ibid., 45

⁸³¹ Ibid., 44.

⁸³² Wallace, “Sacred-Lands Theology,” 313.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, “Signs of a world gone awry”, I have highlighted some of the basic realities that point to the ruthless exploitation of our planet Earth and to the extreme difficult situation of the majority of the earth’s peoples. These signs must to stop if we really want to continue so that life on earth can flourish. The old way of doing business has its days numbered. The need for redressing the situation becomes a matter of urgency.⁸³³

Gudynas is the scholar who has best developed the second hermeneutical principle of Social Ecology: the preferential option for the poor and the marginalized. This is a very much cherished commitment and *cry de couer* of Latin American liberation theology. The poor are “the most threatened of nature’s creatures today” as Leonardo Boff claims.”⁸³⁴ It is within this perspective that the organization of the people for change and liberation is one specific way to respond to the groaning, the frustration, and the futility. As Philippino scholar, Jose P. Cunanan, reminds his readers in his meaningful study on the prophet Joel, “[What] is involved here is the *militancy* of the powerless and impoverished over against the *militarism* of the powerful and affluent.”⁸³⁵ The expression the “children of God” is to be understood in the most extensive and widest possible way. It is in this context that Wesley

⁸³³ The discussion on the issue of climate change provides an example of the commitment to redress the situation. It is found in the Interfaith Declaration on Climate Change, where the signatories commit themselves, their respective faith based organizations and their religious communities to take concrete actions. The text reads: “We commit ourselves to action -- to changing our habits, our choices, and the way we see the world--to learning and teaching our families, friends, and faiths—to conserving the limited resources of our home, planet Earth and preserving the climate conditions upon which life depends.” See <http://www.interfaithdeclaration.org/>

⁸³⁴ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 1 *et passim*.

⁸³⁵ See Jose P. Cunanan, “The Prophet of Environment and Development,” in *Ecotheology: Voices from the South and North*, ed. David Hallman (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 25.

Grandberg-Michaelson claims that “[T]he challenge of preserving the integrity of creation and protecting human wholeness must eventually involve the gathered commitment of the world church, *and countless other groups and organizations.*”⁸³⁶ An open understanding and implementation of the main tenets of Social Ecology offers a possible way. It strongly calls the attention to the fact that “it is impossible to solve our present environmental problems without solving the problems of poverty and exclusion.”⁸³⁷ This is the groan of Social Ecology. The political and social tasks, in their manifold forms, are inescapable responsibilities and opportunities to serve the neighbor and to express love and compassion toward the weaker sector in the society.

The creation groans, and its people, all of them, also groan. All are hoping for a time when they will be set free. The full participation for change in the ecological, social, economic, and political organization for the common good is a decisive step in the direction of the new life in all its fullness for all the children of God.

⁸³⁶ Wesley Grandberg-Michaelson, *Ecology and Life: Accepting our Environmental Responsibility* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 28.

⁸³⁷ Gudynas, “Ecology from the Viewpoint of the Poor,” 112.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE NEW EARTH IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

*The book of John offers the key to everything.*⁸³⁸

*Nothing is less conservative than the apocalyptic genre.*⁸³⁹

Introduction

The book of Revelation⁸⁴⁰ has captivated the imagination of theologians and secular writers through the centuries. Since the arrival of the new millennium in particular, the world has seen an array of articles, essays, sermons, and books written with the purpose of deciphering its meaning for today's world, interpreting current affairs in light of Revelation. Regretfully, it has been used, misused, and abused by churches, sects, and cults, resulting in the loss of precious human lives. For premillennialists and millennialists of all sorts--from Cerinthus and Papias in the early second century through the radical reformers of the sixteenth century to the present--the book of Revelation has been a

⁸³⁸ The opinion of Alinardo, failed librarian, a character in Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 301, who wanted to possess the greatest possible number of commentaries on the book of Revelation.

⁸³⁹ Jacques Derrida "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adapted in Philosophy". Cited in Catherine Keller, "Eyeing the Apocalypse" in *Postmodern Interpretation of the Bible: A Reader*, ed. A.K.M. Adam (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001), 273

⁸⁴⁰ While *revelatio* is the Latin equivalent of the first word of the text, it is interesting to note that the New Testament versions in most Romance languages (Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, Romanian, Catalán, etc.) use the literal translation of the first word of the Greek text (*apokalypsis*) to name this last book of the Christian Bible. While all these languages possess the equivalent to the English word "revelation" (which is derived from the Latin *revelatio*) or the German *Offenbarung*, (i.e. *revelación* in Spanish, *revelação* in Portuguese, *rivelazione* in Italian, *révélation* in French, *revelatie* in Romanian, etc.), the translators prefer to use the literal translation for the title.

source of (mis)inspiration, fear, seduction, calculation and intrigue. Speaking about the endless desire to “unveil” the text, New Testament scholar, Luke T. Johnson, concludes that “...few writings in all of literature have been so obsessively read with such generally disastrous results as the Book of Revelation.” In his view, “Its history of interpretation is largely a story of tragic misinterpretation....”⁸⁴¹

Revelation is not the only known text that belongs to the particular genre called *apocalypse*.⁸⁴² Other texts-- mainly Jewish apocalyptic texts, written earlier or later-- are also well-known and preserved.⁸⁴³ Still texts can further be found in the so-called Gnostic Library of Nag Hammadi.⁸⁴⁴ Contrary to most, however, Revelation is neither anonymous nor pseudonymous. Its author, a certain John (1:1; 1:4) is asked to write what he sees in a book (1:11). The book is addressed “to the seven churches (*hepta ekklesiais*) that are in Asia” (1:4). These seven communities are identified by name: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatire, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (1:11).

⁸⁴¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 573.

⁸⁴² See Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, lxxii. Specific definitions of apocalypse by J. J. Collins and the author himself can be found in pages lxxxii and lxxxviii, respectively.

⁸⁴³ Among them one can mention the Old Testament book of Daniel (especially chapters 7-12); I Enoch; 2 Enoch; 2 Baruch; 3 Baruch; 4 Ezra; The Apocalypse of Abraham; the Testament of Abraham; The Apocalypsis of Elijah; The Apocalypse of Sedrach; the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, and The Shepherd of Hermas.

⁸⁴⁴ Among the Nag Hammadi texts one can find apocalyptic writings, such as the Apocalypse of Paul; The Apocalypse of James (1st and 2nd); the Apocalypse of Adam; the Apocalypse of Peter, and the Apocalypse of Dositheos (also known as the Three Steles of Seth). See the article by Yvonne Janssens “Apocalypses de Nag Hammadi,” in *L’apocalypse johannique et l’apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament*, ed. J. Lambrecht (Paris and Louvain: J. Duculot. S.A. and Leuven University Press, 1980), 69-75.

The last book of the Christian Bible experienced turmoil in the process of its acceptance and reception in the Christian canon. At times, it was simply excluded or ignored. In certain regions of the early Church, particularly in the East, opinions were divided concerning its value as a text of sacred Scripture.

While Luther--whose spirit could not abide Revelation--combined it with Hebrews, James, and Jude at the end of his German translation, believing that it was not part of the true and capital books of the New Testament, the radical wing of the Reformation saw Revelation as an important source of inspiration for its liberationist objectives. Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr., the twentieth-century leader in the struggle for African American civil rights, also makes conspicuous use of the visions and images of Revelation in his famous *Letters from a Birmingham Jail*.

The fluctuating features of Revelation are also reflected in the following two studies. In 1963, French scholar A. Feuillet published his study, *L'Apocalypse: État de la question*, in which he reviewed previous studies undertaken on Revelation. Not without a certain *amertume*, he argued that--among professional exegetes--Revelation no longer attracted as many studies as it once did.⁸⁴⁵ Nevertheless, in 1980, in a follow-up article by U. Vanni, from Rome,⁸⁴⁶ the writer assures his readers that such a perception is no longer correct. With certain elitism, he argues “*L'Apocalypse exerce une attraction particulière sur l'homme moderne, en raison d'un climat de crise ambient.*”

⁸⁴⁵ A. Feuillet, *L'apocalypse: État de la question* (Paris: Desclée de Brower, 1963), 109.

⁸⁴⁶ See U. Vanni, “L’apocalypse johannique. Etat de la question,” in *L’apocalypse johannique et l’apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament*, 21-46

*Mais la redécouverte du livre est surtout le fait des spécialistes et des exégètes.”*⁸⁴⁷

Feminist constructive theologian, Catherine Keller, reminds her readers of the reactions to Revelation from certain well-known figures. Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), the third U.S. president, for example, referred to it as the “ravings of a lunatic.” Irish writer and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) stated that it was “repellant because it resounds with the dangerous snarl of the frustrated, suppressed collective self, the frustrated power spirit in man, vengeful... a curious record of the visions of a drug addict.” Keller, herself, crowns this list with her own opinion: “Congested with vision...a postmodern monstrosity.”⁸⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche’s opinion also is referred to by Keller in another context: “...the most rabid outburst of vindictiveness in all recorded history.”⁸⁴⁹ English novelist, D. H. Lawrence, hailed Revelation as “perhaps the most detestable of all the books of the Bible.”⁸⁵⁰ Seeming rather moderate by comparison, biblical scholar, Richard Bauckham, claims that Revelation is “...a work of immense learning, astonishingly meticulous literary artistry, remarkable creative imagination, radical political critique and profound theology,”⁸⁵¹ and argues that the book’s

⁸⁴⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁸⁴⁸ Catherine Keller, “Eyeing the Apocalypse,” *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible: A Reader*, ed. A. K. N. Adam, 253-277. (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001), 254.

⁸⁴⁹ Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 50.

⁸⁵⁰ D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse and the Writings of Revelation* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 61.

⁸⁵¹ Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), ix.

composition clearly reflects a literary and ideological unity-- “an integrated, interconnected whole.”⁸⁵²

However it is to be noted that at least two important developments have recently taken place in the critical scholarship on Revelation. First, the number of commentaries, monographs and articles has exploded and Revelation has received unprecedented attention from historical critics. Symptomatic of this attention are David Aune’s⁸⁵³ and Gregory Beale’s⁸⁵⁴ massive commentaries. Second, Revelation studies has begun to witness a great methodological diversity. Examples of this can be found in works such as David Barr’s narrative-critical study; Tina Pippin’s feminist study; Justo Gonzalez’s multicultural study; the liberationist studies of Alan Boesak and Pablo Richard; and the liberationist/feminist study of Elizabeth Schuessler-Fiorenza.⁸⁵⁵

Contextualizing Revelation

⁸⁵² Ibid., x.

⁸⁵³ David Aune, *Revelation 1-5*. Word Biblical Commentary 52A (Dallas: Word Books, 1998); idem, *Revelation 6-16*. Word Biblical Commentary 52B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), and idem, *Revelation 17-22*. Word Biblical Commentary 52C (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998).

⁸⁵⁴ Gregory Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1999).

⁸⁵⁵ David Barr, *Tales of The End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1998); Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies. The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Justo L. Gonzalez, *For the Healing of the Nations: The Book of Revelation in an Age of Cultural Conflict* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999); Alan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987); Pablo Richard, *Apocalypsis: Reconstrucción de la Esperanza*. (México: Ediciones Dabar, 1995) and Elizabeth Schuessler-Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*. Proclamation Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

Scholars are not in agreement on the issue of the dating of the book of Revelation. With few notable exceptions,⁸⁵⁶ they are basically divided into two camps. One group, indeed a minority, is inclined to choose the aftermath of Nero's reign (68-69 C.E.). The majority is inclined to choose a much later date, close to the end of the first century, during the period of the reign of Domitian (81-96 C.E.), the last representative of the Flavian dynasty. Leonard Thompson puts forward a kind of "Solomonic" proposal and argues that "we can only be certain, however, that Revelation was written sometime roughly between 68 and 120 C.E."⁸⁵⁷ In this dissertation, I assume the position taken by the majority of scholars, favoring the Domitianic date.

The addressees are Christian communities (*ekklesiai*) located in cities which belonged to the Roman province of Asia. These specific urban settings are of particular importance in the text. The author certainly shows fascination with the cities. The city is the prevailing metaphor in the text. One notes specially the contraposition between Babylon/Rome and Jerusalem and particularly the description of the holy city, the New Jerusalem (21:2)⁸⁵⁸ Scholars such as Barbara Rossing and

⁸⁵⁶ Perhaps one notable exception is J. Stolt, who argues for an earlier date of composition, and fixes Revelation at the time of the reign of Claudius (41-54), in "Om Dateringen af Apokalypsen," *Dansk Teologisk Tidsskrift*, 40 (1977): 202-207, as referenced by. U. Vanni, "L'apocalypse johannique. État de la question," in *L'apocalypse johannique et l'apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament*, 28.

⁸⁵⁷ Leonard Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 23.

⁸⁵⁸ On this specific issue, Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 157-196, dedicate a full chapter to a comparison between the two main cities in Revelation, namely Babylon/Rome and Jerusalem. The chapter is entitled "The City of Our God: Babylon or New Jerusalem?", and includes a table of contrasts between the two cities. *Ibid.*, 160.

Gordon Zerbe have remarked this particular orientation and have referred to Revelation as describing a “a tale of two cities.”⁸⁵⁹

It is to be remembered that most biblical texts were written at times when Israel/Palestine was either under direct or indirect imperial rule, or under its threat. The editors of *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* observe with validity that “For almost the entire history the biblical corpus is formed in reaction to one empire or another.”⁸⁶⁰ Therefore, the empire of the moment (be it Assyria, Babylon, Persia, or Rome) played a definite role both in the daily life of the people and also in the literary production of their elites. In the Hebrew Bible, in general, Babylon is the symbol and personification of the imperial presence and power *par excellence*. And, in the text of Revelation, it clearly represents Rome.

According to Stephen Moore, the Latin term *imperium* “...designated the authority vested in consuls, magistrates, and other selected officials to exercise command and exact obedience... [and later] was deemed to reside supremely in the person of the emperor...extended to all peoples and territories under Rome’s dominion.”⁸⁶¹ Furthermore, Moore argues that *hegemony* --

⁸⁵⁹ Rossing, *The Choice between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse*, (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1999) and Gordon Zerbe, “When Global Traders Ruled the World: The Choice between Babylon and New Jerusalem as Rival Economies.” Unpublished Bible Study presented to the United Church of Christ of the Philippines, October, 24, 2002. Cited by Bishop Erme Camba, “The New Roman Empire,” *Reformed World*, Vol.56 (4) (2006): 404-414.

⁸⁶⁰ Keller, Naussner and Rivera, ed., *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, 10.

⁸⁶¹ Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 99. Moore also describes the corresponding term, *imperialism*, as “the multifarious, mutually constitutive ideologies (political, economic, racial, religious, etc.) that impel a metropolitan center to annex more-or-less distant territories, and that determine its subsequent dealings with them.” (98)

understood as “domination by consent”--as Italian political philosopher, Antonio Gramsci saw it--is the best way to illuminate the mechanism that enabled the continuous imperial presence and control in Roman Asia.⁸⁶²

It is to be noted that a particular feature of the empire after Julius Caesar was the institution of the imperial cult.⁸⁶³ Although it took different forms and characteristics in Rome and in the various Roman provinces, the imperial cult was a condition *sine que non* of the *modus operandi* of the empire. No other part of the Roman Empire shows such rich evidence of the cult as the province of Asia. Price sums up its importance as follows:

The imperial cult, like the cults of the traditional gods, created a relationship of power between subject and rules. It also enhanced the dominance of local elites over the populace, of cities over other cities, and of Greek over indigenous cultures. That is, the cult was a major part of the web of power that formed the fabric of society...along with politics and diplomacy, constructed the reality of the Roman empire.⁸⁶⁴

⁸⁶² Ibid., 101-02. For a lively description of Revelation’s imperial context both in its economic and political aspects, see Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*, particularly 87-119. For a comprehensive study of empire and its significance, see the notable study by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000). In the context of the process of globalization, Hardt and Negri observe that contemporary empire can be compared with a net, which has many knots but no centre. It shows the features of “a *descentered* and *detritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers.” (xii). Moreover, in terms of space, they argue that “the concept of Empire is characterized fundamentally by a lack of boundaries: Empire’s rule has no limits,” and in terms of time, “the Empire presents its rule not as transitory moment in the movement of history, but as a regime with no temporal boundaries and in this sense outside of history or at the end of history”(xv). Finally they add, “[F]rom the perspective of Empire, this is the way things will always be and the way they were always meant to be”(xvi).

⁸⁶³ In this section I am drawing from scholarly studies on the subject, mainly those by Simon R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 775-780; Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*, 102-113; and Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*.

⁸⁶⁴ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 248.

It is almost impossible to understand why the book of Revelation was written if one does not gauge the pivotal importance of this institution, which was basically “a system whose structure defines the position of the emperor.”⁸⁶⁵ Price claims that “the imperial cult was another way by which the emperor was constructed,”⁸⁶⁶ and, therefore, the way power was understood. Schuessler Fiorenza argues in this context that “...economic exploitation and retaliation are two of the beast’s most powerful weapons for persuading people to participate in the imperial cult.”⁸⁶⁷ The imperial cult was a fully developed system in which “religion” and “politics” blurred the boundaries, and were inextricably linked to each other. Néstor Míguez further points out, in referring to the use of “religion,” that

Empires resort to symbolism to justify and support this claim to absolute power... the divinization of Emperors, the construction of the official Roman religion, the subordinate inclusion of the gods and goddesses of the conquered people in the religious sphere, the claim of the *Pax Deorum* as the celestial counterpart of the *Pax Romana*, and so on.⁸⁶⁸

For the author of Revelation, the imperial cult was an abomination. Rev. 13: 4 probably makes reference to this cult (*prosekunêsan tō drakonti*) and the “blasphemous names” (*onomata blasphemias*) on the head of the beast in 13:1 may well refer to the emperor’s honorific titles such as “god” and “lord.”⁸⁶⁹ The writer shows an uncompromising rejection of the imperial cult and of its terrible and destructive consequences for its followers. Such rejection reaches

⁸⁶⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid., 242.

⁸⁶⁷ Schuessler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 100.

⁸⁶⁸ Néstor Míguez, “The Empire and the Precarious: The Relevance of an Apocalyptic Faith.” Unpublished manuscript read at the Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquium, “An American Empire?” at Drew University, September 2003.

⁸⁶⁹ See Schuessler Fiorenza, *Revelation*.

the point of being almost a form of sadistic revenge on the enemies, who “will be tormented with fire and sulfur” (*basanisthēsetai en pyri kai theiō*) (14:10b). It is quite possible that one of the reasons why Revelation was written was to encourage the members of the communities to stay away from this satanic manifestation of the empire, and thus render true worship only to God and the Lamb, who were the only worthy recipients “to receive power (*labein ten dynamin*) and wealth (*plouton*) and wisdom (*sophian*) and might (*ischyn*) and honor (*kai timēn*) and blessing (*doxan*)” and glory (*eulogian*) and (5:12). Note that the attributes mentioned here were recognized as resting with the emperor.

Moore describes the position of John as “anti-assimilationist,” as well as counter-hegemonic. He concludes: “Revelation enjoins a practice of non-violent resistance to empire instead, a symbolic ‘coming out’ of empire (cf. 18:4).”⁸⁷⁰ Furthermore, in his view, it represents “a stunning early instance of anti-imperial literature of resistance.”⁸⁷¹ Paradoxically, however, John seems to be somehow caught up in the web of the imperial cult, as Moore sharply observes. That is, while urging his hearers/readers not to take part in the cult, John himself creates a divine empire that is closely modeled on the Roman empire, an argument to which I will later return.

Revelation and Ecology: an Oxymoron?

At first glance, the book of Revelation does not seem to invite its readers/hearers to a sound ecological/socio-ecological reflection. Rather, the opposite

⁸⁷⁰ Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 117.

⁸⁷¹ Ibid., 105. It is to be noted here Moore’s sharp and cautious reading of Revelation from a postcolonial perspective. In his view, Revelation portrays both “resistance and entanglement with the Empire” Ibid., 123, and, fundamentally, in his view, it reinscribes Roman imperial ideology.” Ibid., 118-121.

seems to be the case. In general, traditional and influential fundamentalist/premillennialists readings of the text invite Christians to fly away from the realities of the earth, because after all, it is doomed to destruction. Typical examples of such readings are the best-seller books by the prolific writer Hal Lindsay⁸⁷² and *The Left Behind* series.⁸⁷³ As discussed further below, Barbara Rossing's book *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*,⁸⁷⁴ is an attempt to critically challenge the whole perspective and understanding of such interpretations. Furthermore, Harry Maier's essay "There's a New World Coming! Reading the Apocalypse in the Shadow of the Canadian Rockies," and Duncan Reid's essay "Setting Aside the Ladder to Heaven: Revelation 21:1-22:5 from the Perspective of the Earth," also expose that kind of superficial and escapist reading.⁸⁷⁵ Such studies aim to discover Revelation's invitation to resist oppressive forces which destroy people and the earth. Furthermore, the text invites an active response which is inspired and sustained by the hope of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1).

On the particular question of the way in which Revelation depicts the earth, it is worth noting some of the tensions, conflicting views, contradictions, and ambiguities present in the text. There seem to be contrasting messages in the way the earth is viewed. It is true that some of the texts are difficult from the point of view of an ecological reading, notably 8:1-12, chapter 9, and 16:3ff.

⁸⁷² *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970); *There is a New World Coming: 'A Prophetic Odyssey'* (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House, 1973); *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon* (New York: Bantam, 1981); and *The Rapture* (New York: Bantam, 1983).

⁸⁷³ Popular apocalyptic fictions written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, notably including *The Left Behind*; *The Rising*; *The Regime: The Rise of the Antichrist*; and *Kingdom Come: The Final Victory*.

⁸⁷⁴ Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2004.

⁸⁷⁵ Respectively in *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, 166-179; and *Readings from the Perspective of the Earth*, 232-245.

Can Revelation still be salvaged from its seemingly ecocidal views, and the literal annihilation of the earth and heavens as portrayed as divinely ordained? Perhaps these are passages, as Rossing argues, that should be counted among those which are simply irretrievable.⁸⁷⁶

By the way they depict destruction, Revelation chapters 8 and 9 exceed a dozen disaster movies. Only the stories and experiences of the *tsunami* survivors may be close to the description of these chapters. The seventh seal is opened by the lamb, and a new judgment is about to start. While there is “silence in heaven for about a half hour (*sigê en tō ouranō ōs emiōron*) (8:1), hell breaks loose on the earth. The new sevenfold cycle is introduced. A censer filled with fire is thrown to the earth, with devastating results: peals of thunder (*brontai*), rumblings and flashes of lightning (*phonai kai astrapai*, “sounds of lightnings”) and an earthquake (*seismos*) (8:5b), elements traditionally associated with theophanies. All of these images appear as a picture of total devastation and desolation, indeed, frightening. It seems difficult to find a better description of a biocide. Third by third, the destruction is unleashed upon the earth, the trees, and the green grass (8:7). It looks almost like an anticipation of today’s destruction of the tropical forests and the burning of trees for animal grazing. The destruction also affects the sea, and all that is in it or on top of it, such as the living creatures and even the ships (8:9); the rivers and the springs of water also become contaminated, and people lose their lives because of such events (8:10-11). An ecocide is unfolding before the eyes of the seer and ours. Even the cosmos is involved: the sun, the moon

⁸⁷⁶ Barbara Rossing, “River of Life in God’s New Jerusalem,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, 205-224.

and the stars are struck and darkened (8:12). Having the narrative of creation in Genesis 1 as an intertext, one can say that the vision is a “de-creation,” as some scholars have pointed out.⁸⁷⁷

Announced by the cries of an eagle (8:13) and the angel’s trumpet (9:1), what happens in chapter 9 continues to be impressive. A star has fallen to earth (9:1), and the sun and the air are darkened by the smoke coming out of the bottomless pit (9:2). Egypt-style plagues now desolate the earth. The locusts, like (de)humanized horses, (*homoioi hippos*) (9:7) with “tails like scorpions, with stingers” (9:10) enter the action. However, contrary to ordinary locusts, they are now taking on people--not killing them, however, but... torturing them!⁸⁷⁸ Even the right to euthanasia, requested by those primarily concerned, is denied (9:6). Mercilessness seems to be the marching order of the day. Picasso’s *Guernica*⁸⁷⁹ is just a pale reflection of the graphic atrocities described here. “By these three plagues, a third of humankind was killed...” (9:18) recounts the seer. It is difficult for anyone to stomach. But was it not said by the angel that “it will be bitter to your stomach”? (10:9b). These visions are particularly difficult if not repugnant for those concerned with the survival of humankind and otherkind. Is all this needed for “liberation”? The

⁸⁷⁷ Harry Maier, “There’s a New World Coming!,” 171.

⁸⁷⁸ Scholars frequently compare the horses’ description with the feared Parthian cavalry, especially trained in the use of the strategy of attacking while retreating. Rome considered the Parthians as serious enemies and the writer seem to adhere to this perception. Prigent, however, is not in agreement with this view. See *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John* (Tuebingen: J.C.B Mohr, 2001), 313.

⁸⁷⁹ Pablo Picasso, the Spanish artist, painted his now famous *Guernica* as a powerful anti-war statement. It reminds the world of the devastation produced in the Basque city of Guernica by the bombing of Hitler’s planes on April 27th, 1937, in the midst of the tragic Spanish civil war. Guernica burnt during three days and 1600 civilians are estimated to have been killed or wounded.

pre-biocide continues, although in a slightly modified way. Some scholars argue that it is not total but partial, for it lasts only a few months (“for five months,” *mênas pente*) (9:5), and includes only “a third of humanity” (*to triton tôn anthrôpôn*) (9:15b). But has anyone fathomed what it means to be tortured for “only” five months?

Another bead in this rosary of catastrophes is chapter 16, a kind of repetition of chapter 8. This text is part of the scenario of the destruction of Babylon/Rome which comes as the result of the pouring on the earth by seven angels of the seven bowls of God’s wrath (16:1). The result on the sea, where life is said to have originated, is precisely its annihilation: “...and every living thing in the sea died” (*kai pasa psychê zoês apethanen ta en tê thalassê*) (16:3). This is not all, however. Something more is to happen, that is “...a violent earthquake, such as had not occurred since people were upon the earth, so violent was the earthquake” (16:17), “... and every island flew away, and no mountains were to be found; and huge hailstones, each weighing about a hundred pounds, dropped from heaven to people...so fearful was that plague” (16:21). It looks like “a successive bombardment upon the earth” as David Barr appropriately puts it.⁸⁸⁰ After hearing/imagining all of this, it seems difficult to disagree with Nietzsche’s opinion that Revelation is the most rabid outburst of vindictiveness in all recorded history. We are confronted with a brutal choreography of violence. Here we need to take seriously Keller’s

⁸⁸⁰ Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 131.

concern about “the multiple and contradictory effects of a particular biblical text.”⁸⁸¹

Is it only destruction that we have there? Should we simply concur with Tina Pippin’s view that “a good apocalypse is hard to find”?⁸⁸² Have we touched the bottom? How and where do we begin to emerge from this bottomless pit? How do we understand what is described? Who are the destroyers of the earth --the Abaddons and the Apollyons, (9: 11b), the “Terminators,” who in turn will be destroyed by the wrath of God, as announced by the seventh trumpet (11:18)? Shouldn’t we also remember Bookchin’s story about the exhibition at the museum and make a careful distinction between all humankind and those from among humans who have a bigger responsibility for the destruction of our planet?⁸⁸³

With this in mind, can the book of Revelation still be a source for reflecting about the well-being and sustenance of all creation? Can we find elements for an ecological reflection that liberates both the human and the more-than-human world from its captivity or “futility” (*mataiotēti*) as Paul puts it in Rom. 8:20? Or it is too much to ask such (post?) modern questions to a book written some nineteen hundred years ago?

Other possible readings of the book of Revelation

Any consideration of whether Revelation is to be regarded as an asset of an obstacle to ecotheology and ecojustice is best situated within the broader

⁸⁸¹ Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 26.

⁸⁸² Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (London: Routledge, 1999), 13.

⁸⁸³ See chapter two of this study.

contemporary discussion on whether or not Revelation is, at base, pro- or anti-imperial(istic), ultimately oppressive or ultimately emancipatory. Biblical scholar Greg Carey reviews the different rhetorical claims in the reading of Revelation. While his description may appear at first glance too schematic, it may help to describe the rather wide spectrum of students and readers. In his opinion, the readings can be classified in three categories: the liberationist readers, the prophecy students, and the biblical scholars. One may question such a seemingly watertight separation--as all categories leak--and wonders why he does not consider liberationist readers to be also biblical scholars. The examples of studies done by Elizabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, Allan Boesak, and Pablo Richard speak for themselves. In any case, he argues that all readings (his own included?) make “extremely high claims to authority,” and “their own discourses participate in Revelation’s rhetoric of ultimate authority.”⁸⁸⁴

Following Carey’s picture, I would like to highlight here some examples of such readings. From among the “different sensitivities” that have attempted critical studies of Revelation, liberationist readings done by biblical scholars and concerned theologians deserve to be mentioned. The readings of Revelation, done particularly by people under extremely difficult social conditions of oppression, or in solidarity with them, have shown the importance that the text may have for the liberation struggle. Two examples of such readings are the studies of anti-apartheid leader Allan Boesak, writing from a South African prison, and of the exiled Chilean scholar Pablo Richard. One can also mention in this context the work of feminist liberation scholar Elizabeth

⁸⁸⁴ Greg Carey, *Elusive Apocalypse: Reading Authority in the Revelation to John*. Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 15 (Macon, GA.: Mercer University Press, 1999), 42.

Schuessler Fiorenza. Furthermore, the studies of Justo Gonzalez, Brian K. Blount, as well as that of Howard Brook and Gwyther are also part of this particular and meaningful way of reading the text.⁸⁸⁵

Pablo Richard claims that “scholarly research and work with pastoral agents on Christian base communities have been converging labors. This book is the outgrowth of a close connection between scholarship and the Spirit.”⁸⁸⁶ The Chilean liberation theologian is convinced that Revelation “transmits a spirituality of resistance and offers guidance for organizing an alternative world.”⁸⁸⁷ Moreover, he argues that “over the long run, it was disregard of Revelation that opened the way for the incorporation of the church into the dominant imperial system and the construction of an authoritarian Christendom.”⁸⁸⁸

Schuessler Fiorenza, in turn, raises a fundamental question, the question of power. Whose interests are served? Which practices are legitimized? She recognizes that as a possible reading strategy, the book of Revelation “seeks to offer not only a way for understanding and naming the powers of evil but also a vision of justice and well-being that motivates the reader to engage in

⁸⁸⁵ Howard-Brook, and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*; Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Gonzalez, *For the Healing of the Nations* and David Rhoads, ed., *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 2005.

⁸⁸⁶ Richard, *Apocalypse*, 1.

⁸⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

resistance and struggle for change...Its vision of justice and or a world free of hunger and evil engenders hope and the courage to struggle.⁸⁸⁹

These readings basically portray a text that is overall a call to resist and be hopeful in times of crisis. Revelation is a book that has a fundamental anti-imperial thrust which boldly denounces the exploitation and oppression of the people, and enlists its readers/hearers in the struggle for justice for all.

Nevertheless, there are also other reading strategies the have been applied to the same texts. In this context it is also important to highlight these, which are, indeed, invitations to critically review the text in question. Examples of these critical readings are the work of two feminist /postmodern and postcolonial critics, namely, Catherine Keller and Stephen D. Moore.

Keller, herself, a constructive theologian, has written two full- fledged studies on Revelation.⁸⁹⁰ In reading Revelation, Keller offers a warning to a simplistic “liberation hermeneutic” that does not admit “the moral limits of the book.”⁸⁹¹ She alludes to the classic study of James Scott⁸⁹² and admits that Revelation is “the master script of the hidden transcripts... a countercultural code of dissent.” Dialectically, she also argues that Revelation is not “the canonical text of subversion,” for in its ambiguity, “it is capable of both revolution and

⁸⁸⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁹⁰ Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996) and *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005). See also “Eyeing the Apocalypse,” in A. K. M. Adam, ed., *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible: A Reader*, 253-277.

⁸⁹¹ Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 259.

⁸⁹² James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

reaction, and often of combustions of the two.”⁸⁹³ In her review of readings, she acknowledges that “one may also find a few Christian theological voices reading the Apocalypse as a prophetic resource for social and ecological accountability today.”⁸⁹⁴ Nevertheless, she is critical of unambiguous progressive readings. Keller prefers “to open a more troubled space, one at once disturbing and attractive, a discursive zone in which to attend to the multiple and contradictory effects of a particular biblical text.”⁸⁹⁵ She aptly uses the style of the *midrash* to hear and read the text, “that unique, rabbinic model of a layered multiplicity of interpretations.”⁸⁹⁶ In her later book, she continues her critical reflections on Revelation, now in light of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 and its aftermath.⁸⁹⁷ She calls her reflections “theopolitical investigations,” and advocates, “‘a counter-apocalypse,’ which finds relevance in apocalyptic narrative without acquiescing in its cruelties or its literalizations.”⁸⁹⁸

Keller is consistent in her critique of the “mysogynist iconography” found in the book of Revelation,⁸⁹⁹ and of its ambivalent confrontation to and mimicry of the Roman Empire.⁹⁰⁰ An important perspective that Keller introduces in this text is her willingness to see the resurgence of working coalitions of diverse historically oppressed groups in the anti-imperialist struggle. In full respect of the diversity of identities and of its political demands, and using

⁸⁹³ Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 10.

⁸⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17 f.

⁸⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁸⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸⁹⁷ Keller, *God and Power: Counter-apocalyptic Journeys*.

⁸⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁸⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

Homi Bhabha's idea of "interstitial perspective," Keller highlights the "possibility of new and more resilient global coalitions, in which our variously impure and hybrid identities can morph from political liability into asset."⁹⁰¹ This notable *cri de coeur* can be seen as an echo of Gudynas' position in the praxis for the struggle for life, in which all progressive forces have to contribute. Keller calls her *compadres* and *comadres* to face the tensions of multiple visions "which may hold open a space in which together we face our fears and activate our hopes."⁹⁰²

Biblical scholar Stephen Moore, in turn, assumes a postcolonial perspective in his reading of Revelation. In an insightful study, he observes that a "parody of the Roman imperial order permeates Revelation... in its redeployment of the term 'empire' (*basileia*) itself."⁹⁰³ Moore argues that in the reproduction of imperial structures and features, John is unable to disentangle himself from the empire. He notes that "Critical scholars ...have customarily read it as the most uncompromising attack of the Roman Empire, and of Christian collusion with the empire, to issue from early Christianity."⁹⁰⁴ He admits that

at first and even second glance, Revelation would appear to be an anti-imperial(istic) text that, in effect, announces the transfers of worldwide imperium from the Roman emperor to the heavenly Emperor and his Son and co-regent, the "King of kings and Lord of Lords," (Rev.19:16; cf.17:14)... The paramount question... is whether or to what extent Revelation merely reinscribes, rather than effectively resists, Roman imperial ideology.⁹⁰⁵

⁹⁰¹ Ibid., 103.

⁹⁰² Ibid., 68.

⁹⁰³ Stephen Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament*. The Bible in the Modern World, 12 (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 106.

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid., 97.

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid., 99.

This is his fundamental thesis. In his view, Revelation contains a “dualism that attains its apogee in the construction of the New Jerusalem” ⁹⁰⁶ In a nutshell, Moore argues, Revelation is a book of mimicry, a phenomenon which is endemic to it.

Against simplistic interpretations, Moore raises critical questions. He argues that such perspectives are not that univocal and straightforward, and evidently bring with them a number of problems. Moore sharply states that “the Divine Empire that Revelation proclaims is anything but independent from the Roman empire. Instead it is parasitic on it.” Moreover, he argues that

[M]ore than any other early Christian text (prior to Tertullian, at any rate), Revelation epitomizes the theo-imperialistic orientation that enabled the Roman state effortlessly to absorb Christianity into itself, to turn Christianity into a version of itself, to turn itself into a version of Christianity-- notwithstanding the fact that Revelation is also ostensibly more hostile to Rome than any other early Christian text. ⁹⁰⁷

Paraphrasing the title of an article by Audre Lorde, ⁹⁰⁸ Moore states that the text is “emblematic of the difficulty of using the emperor’s tools to dismantle the emperor’s palace.”⁹⁰⁹ Nevertheless in critical scholarship, questions have the particularity of suggesting new questions. Evidently, Moore’s statement begs the questions: are there other tools at one’s disposal? And if so, what are they? Are they totally incompatible with those of the palace? What are the political strategies and tactics that correspond to such a radical position? Howard-Brook and Gwyther, in the final chapter of their book, entitled “Coming out of Empire Today” claim:

⁹⁰⁶ Ibid., 108.

⁹⁰⁷ Ibid., 119.

⁹⁰⁸ “The Master’s Tool will never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Morraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Brooklyn: Kitchen Table, 1983), 98-101.

⁹⁰⁹ Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 114.

[F]or change to take place, good people cannot expect the conversion of empire into something else or its “redemption.” Rather, a totally different system must be built alongside the imperial one. Is this just a pipe dream, as unlikely as the descent from heaven of a fully formed New Jerusalem, or does it offer a practical plan of survival?⁹¹⁰

The authors cite the proposals of Irish economist, Richard Douthwaite in his book *Short Circuit: Strengthening Local Economies for Security in an Unstable World*,⁹¹¹ as examples of possibilities that may help to break out of domination of the current empire.

In engaging Moore, Tat-Siong Benny Liew asks, “Is there something to be said about fighting the ‘master’ on the ‘master’s’ ground with the ‘master’s’ own methods? Then, if not, what is left but defeatism and hopelessness?”⁹¹² Murray Bookchin --perhaps a more seasoned strategist--avoids ready-made prescriptions, and points to a way to go “from here to there.” He invites his readers to learn from already-attempted strategies and even from historical failures. Dialectically, he concludes that “the means for tearing down the old are available, both as hope and as peril. So, too, are the means for rebuilding. *The ruins themselves are mines for recycling the wastes of an immensely perishable world into the structural materials of one that is free as well as new.*”⁹¹³ Elsewhere, Bookchin made reference to the important “reconstructive nature of [social]ecology”⁹¹⁴ and precisely argues that its essence “can be summed up in the word ‘diversity’.”⁹¹⁵

⁹¹⁰ Howard- Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, 265.

⁹¹¹ Dublin: Resurgence Books, 1996.

⁹¹² Liew, *Politics of Parousia*, 22.

⁹¹³ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 347. Emphasis mine.

⁹¹⁴ Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (San Francisco: Rampart Press, 1971),

68.

⁹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

I want to gratefully acknowledge these different perspectives and critical readings. They are part of its polytonality, of its lending towards an endless plurality of viewpoints. Despite the ambiguities in the text and the plurivocal possibilities of interpretations, I am strongly convinced that the social ecology reading followed in this study is also a valid way to read the book's overall call to resist and be faithful, even to death (*pistos achri thanatou*) (2:10c). Revelation can and has been read as an uncompromising rejection of the dehumanizing forces and expressions of the centralized power of the empire, and of its oppressive features for the majority of the people and for creation as a whole. This is the perspective that this socio-ecological/ecojustice reading follows. Yes, the *reconstrucción de la esperanza* is still possible, the open door (*thuran ene ônmen ên*) (3:8) is there, just as there is still room to confront and resist the annihilating presence of the imperial powers that be.

It is precisely the study on the book of Revelation by Paulo Richard which carries in its Spanish original the subtitle, "*reconstrucción de la esperanza*."⁹¹⁶ Although Richard does not concentrate on purely ecological questions, his attempt at the "reconstruction of hope" may be seen as a complement to it. It is indeed also a valid challenge to anyone who wants to look at the text from the perspective of ecology, or of social ecology, for that matter.

Revelation and Ecology: Moving beyond the oxymoron

A series of exegetical studies have recently seen the light in which the question of ecology in the book of Revelation has been highlighted and explored at

⁹¹⁶ Pablo Richard, *Apocalipsis: Reconstrucción de la Esperanza* (México: Ediciones Dabar, 1995).

length. Some of these were referred to briefly above.⁹¹⁷ These critical studies have questioned some of the established historical-critical readings of Revelation and engaged against fundamentalist and milleannalist trends which became even more “popular” as the new millennium approached. Of particular interest for this study are the works focused on Revelation 21 and 22. Basically, most of them approach the text from the perspective of the ecojustice principle(s) spelled out by the Earth Bible Project.⁹¹⁸

Rossing’s contribution to the first volume of the monumental collection of studies of Religions of the World and Ecology, briefly mentioned above, is

⁹¹⁷ Here I am referring particularly to Barbara Rossing, a USA Lutheran biblical scholar who wrote her Ph D dissertation at Harvard University under the guidance of Helmut Koester. She is perhaps the person who has produced most studies in this area. See Barbara Rossing, “River of Life in God’s New Jerusalem: An Ecological Vision for the Earth’s Future,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Hessel and Radford Ruether, 205-224 (reprinted from *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25 (1998): 487-499); Rossing, “For the Healing of the World: Reading *Revelation* Ecologically,” in *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, ed. David Rhoads (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 165-182; Rossing, *The Choice between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1999); and Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2004). Note the similar subtitle to Richard’s Spanish original version. The ground-breaking series *The Earth Bible Project*, under the leadership of Norman Habel, has also published the following studies on Revelation: Duncan Reid, “Setting Aside the Ladder to Heaven: Revelation 21:1-22:5 from the Perspective of the Earth,” in *Readings from the Perspective of the Earth*, ed. Habel, 232-245; Barbara Rossing, “Alas for the Earth! Lament and Resistance in Revelation 12,” also in *Readings from the Perspective of the Earth*, ed. Habel, 180-192; and Harry Maier, “There’s a New World Coming! Reading the Apocalypse in the Shadow of the Canadian Rockies,” in *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, ed. Habel and Balabanski, 166-179.

⁹¹⁸ See Habel and Balabansky, ed., *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, xx. These principles are listed in chapter two of this study. The reader may wish to note some similarities and differences between these principles and the eight principles that constitute the exegetical framework for this dissertation and which are based on Social Ecology and ecojustice, also described in chapter two.

worth highlighting here.⁹¹⁹ She argues that the book of Revelation “is also profoundly ecological.”⁹²⁰ For her as for many other scholars, Babylon and the New Jerusalem are contrasting cities, and she claims that “these two contrasting visions of political economy can be a resource for the earth-centered ecological vision of the future...”⁹²¹ She describes the contrast between the two cities and highlights the ecological significance of water in the last two chapters of the book of Revelation. Rossing attempts to bring out also some political and economic dimensions that appear in the text.

In her contribution to the Earth Bible Project, Rossing focus her reflection on Revelation chapter 12. She argues that the text is not a curse but a lament for the Earth. She observes that instead of “woe” to the earth --as the Greek *ouai* in Rev. 12:12 is usually translated-- should be replaced by the word “alas,” “so that the verse becomes God’s cry of mourning or lamentation over Earth.”⁹²² And not only that, she contends that such way of translating “conveys a level of sympathy or concern for Earth...”⁹²³ For Rossing, the lament over the Earth should be understood “as part of the book’s political critique against Roman imperial exploitation.”⁹²⁴ Furthermore, Earth --in her opinion—enacts an act of resistance against Rome when it comes to help the woman (Rev.12:16-17). Elsewhere, she argues that the ““end” that the book “envisions [is] an end not

⁹¹⁹ Rossing, “River of Life in God’s New Jerusalem.”

⁹²⁰ Ibid., 206.

⁹²¹ Ibid., 206.

⁹²² Rossing, “Alas for the Earth,” 181.

⁹²³ Ibid., 183.

⁹²⁴ Ibid., 184.

to the earth but to the Roman imperial order of oppression and destruction... the goal is liberation, not environmental destruction”⁹²⁵

Rossing’s latest contribution on the subject is found in the collection of articles edited by David Rhoads mentioned above. She clearly states that the author of Revelation “is not an environmentalist in the modern sense.”⁹²⁶ Nevertheless, in its message of hope, Revelation portrays, in her opinion, “a life-giving vision for our world...”⁹²⁷ She argues that Revelation states an anti-imperial position, and contends that the book’s “primary polemic is not against the earth as such, but against the exploitation of the earth and its peoples.”⁹²⁸ Rossing quotes Pablo Richard when she is trying to relate the first century imperial situation to the current ecological and economic predicament, but in my view, she falls short of developing both a more critical approach to today’s imperial exploitative and globalized capitalist system and a concrete strategy for a political praxis or ethical discourse.

Canadian scholar Harry Maier coincides with Rossing as he offers a reading of the first five verses of the last chapter of the book of Revelation, which in his view, is “a vision of Earth creatures living in life-affirming ecological interdependence.”⁹²⁹ One of his main conclusions is that the environmental calamities described earlier in the text are to be seen in the light of the final vision, and not *vice versa*, as the premillennialist interpretation pretends. He

168. ⁹²⁵ Rossing, “For the Healing of the World: Reading *Revelation* Ecologically,”

⁹²⁶ Ibid., 166.

⁹²⁷ Ibid., 167.

⁹²⁸ Ibid., 173.

⁹²⁹ Maier, “There’s a New World Coming,!” 170.

uses the second Earth Bible ecojustice principle-- “Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival--” and reflects on the text *autobiographically*, that is, from his own experience as a young Canadian traveling through Western Canada, more precisely through the Rocky Mountains. Maier also intertwines his reading with experiences of some of the North Americans Indigenous (First Nations) Peoples.

Pointing to the shortcomings of traditional historical-critical readings and their putative “objective scientific detachment,”⁹³⁰ Maier argues that in his autobiographical exegesis he tries “to connect Earth community, exegesis and text.”⁹³¹ His exegesis, he claims, is not anthropocentric, and it uses the “network” metaphor as a useful tool to understand life in its complex and multiple relationships. Furthermore, and against the dismissal by critical scholars of the implications involved in the readings of dispensationalists, Maier is concerned with the practical socio-economic and political functions of such readings, that end up making “the majority of Earth’s inhabitants slaves to greed and Earth-destroying ambition.”⁹³²

The Canadian scholar does not omit to open up in his exegetical work the close relationship between ecology and socioeconomic relations among people. He observes that “[I]n Revelation, ecological disaster portrays broken relations between humans and with God.”⁹³³ Conversely, he explains, “[T]he vision [of

⁹³⁰ Ibid., 169.

⁹³¹ Ibid., 168.

⁹³² Ibid., 172.

⁹³³ Ibid., 175.

the New Jerusalem] sets out a renewed heaven and Earth made new through right relationship.”⁹³⁴ Taking the clue from traditions and perspectives from the people of the First Nations, Maier concludes that what is found in Rev. 22:1-5 is not unlike a giveaway. He observes that “[T]he counter-economy of the Apocalypse replaces conspicuous accumulation with conspicuous generosity.”⁹³⁵

In Duncan Reid’s study “Setting Aside the Ladder to Heaven: Revelation 21:1-22:5 from the Perspective of the Earth,” the author also recognizes that “there may be elements in this text that are simply irretrievable from an ecojustice perspective.”⁹³⁶ In his exegesis, he links Revelation chapter 21 to chapter 18, particularly in his interpretation of the verse, “and the sea was no more” (21:1c). He claims that “The sea has indeed become a threatening thing, but not because of its mythic power,” --as Bauckham argues.⁹³⁷ “On the contrary,” Reid observes, “it is a threat because it has been enslaved; it is in servitude to the merchant fleets of Rome.”⁹³⁸ The author claims that the text “functions as a commentary of Isaiah 65,”⁹³⁹ and following Juergen Moltmann, argues for a holistic understanding of Redemption, which is “interpreted cosmologically, “heavens and earth”...human beings without their surroundings –albeit urban surroundings—are simple inconceivable.”⁹⁴⁰ The new city that comes from

⁹³⁴ Ibid., 178.

⁹³⁵ Ibid., 179.

⁹³⁶ Reid, “Setting Aside the Ladder to Heaven: Revelation 21:1-22:5 from the Perspective of the Earth,” 233.

⁹³⁷ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 53.

⁹³⁸ “Setting Aside the Ladder to Heaven,” 237.

⁹³⁹ Ibid., 242.

⁹⁴⁰ Ibid., 240.

heaven, the New Jerusalem, is, in his opinion, a reality that “is to be enjoyed, rather than to be used.”⁹⁴¹

In my sympathetic and critical reading of the contributions to the Earth Bible Project, Rossing and Maier are perhaps the ones which come closer to a more holistic, “social ecology-style” of reading of the texts. Nevertheless, in my opinion, they stop short of further elaborating a fruitful engagement with the possible correlation between the ancient imperial context and the present one. In the introduction and in chapter two of this study I have referred to these authors and concluded--using Juan Luis Segundo’s felicitous expression—that in their studies, the hermeneutic circle is not realized.⁹⁴² I am not advocating here for a simplistic exercise of comparison of the similarities and differences between two different historical contexts. I am talking about the possibility of a meaningful encounter between exegesis and socio-political praxis, as a space for encounter and challenging, of mutual illumination between a given historical context and a biblical text.⁹⁴³

⁹⁴¹ Ibid., 243.

⁹⁴² See, Juan Luis Segundo, “The Hermeneutic Circle,” in *Third World Liberation Theologies*, ed. Deane William Fenn (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1986), 64ff.

⁹⁴³ On this matter, see Moore’s comments in *Empire and Apocalypse*, 18. It is interesting to note that a former director of the WCC Commission on the Churches on International Affairs, Indian scholar Ninan Koshy, aptly quotes Jonathan Freeland in his article in *The Guardian*, Sept. 18, 2002 as follows: “For the US’s entire approach to empire looks quintessentially Roman. It is as if the Romans bequeathed a blueprint for how imperial business should be done and today Americans are following it religiously.” See: “The Global Empire: An Overview,” *Reformed World*, Vol.56 (4) (2006): 335-347, here 340. Furthermore, in the same issue, entitled EMPIRE, Philippina scholar Carmencita Karagdag’s article “Under the Guise of the War on Terror: Empire in Asia,” (355-363), tries, under a series of headings “like today...,” to engage the Roman imperial context with the present socio-political and economic

I am convinced that despite all these different and sometimes conflicting views on how to read and understand the text of Revelation, still one can discover a "golden thread" that also runs through the text and culminates in chapters 21 and 22, in which a much greater appreciation of the whole creation can be perceived, and hope actualized. German scholar Adelbert Scholz reminds us that "the apocalyptic tendencies of the New Testament must not be isolated, and it should be taken into consideration that they reflect the bad schemes and patterns of the world but not to creation and the world as such" ⁹⁴⁴

Revelation: The Empire (*Basileia*), and the earth.

*The earth is at the same time mother,
She is mother of all that is natural,
mother of all that is human.*
Hildegard of Bingen

*En las colonias, la regla es la desigualdad social, en
las colonias, la libertad es para pocos.*
José María Rosa (Argentine historian)

In the form of a letter (like that of John?) to the churches of the world, the ecumenical delegation attending the Rio Summit challenged the churches to engage themselves against "the prevailing system [that] is exploiting nature and peoples on a worldwide scale and promises to continue at an intensified rate." ⁹⁴⁵ They called upon the churches to be places of resistance and to create areas "where we learn anew what it means that God's covenant extends to all

imperial context. Similarly, Erme R. Camba, "The New Roman Empire," *Reformed World*, Vol.56 (4) (2006): 404-414.

⁹⁴⁴ "The Integrity of Creation," in *Reintegrating God's Creation. A Paper for Discussion*, ed. Bernd Schulze (Geneva: WCC Church and Society, 1987), 16.

⁹⁴⁵ Granberg-Michaelson, *Redeeming the Creation-The Rio Earth Summit*, 71.

creatures, by rediscovering the eco-centric dimension of the Bible”⁹⁴⁶ Could this letter be read also as a call--this time not from Patmos but from the “South”-- to endurance, hope, organization, and faithfulness in view of the new signs of the times?

As noted earlier, the prefix, *eco* (from the Greek *oikos*, meaning home, household) is found in diverse forms in words such as *ecology*, *economy* (the rules of the household), and *ecumenical* (the whole inhabited world, the earth community). Thus, Revelation can now be studied from the perspective of social ecology, combining both dimensions of justice in *ecological* and *economic* terms. Principle III of social ecology/ecojustice as described in chapter two speaks of the close interrelationship between economy, ecology and politics. And it will also be looked at -- following Pablo Richard-- “from the perspective of the oppressed people: the poor, the indigenous people, the black, the women, the young people, the cosmos and nature, and from all those who are discriminated against by the oppressor and the idolatrous system.”⁹⁴⁷

F.1. *Economics*

Bill Clinton, the former U.S. president, made famous the expression “it is the economy... stupid!” He was trying to explain the reasons behind the success of his reelection, pointing to the fundamental role it plays in the world of politics. Murray Bookchin reminds his readers that “what makes capitalism so unique is the sweeping power it gives to economics: the supremacy it imparts to *homo*

⁹⁴⁶ Ibid., 73

⁹⁴⁷ Pablo Richard, *Apocalipsis: Reconstrucción de la Esperanza* (México, D.F: Ediciones Dabar, 1995), 10.

economicus.”⁹⁴⁸ Moreover, David Korten, faculty member of the Harvard Graduate School of Business, goes a step further. For him, “...the process of economic globalization... is shifting power away from governments responsible for the good toward a handful of corporations and financial institutions...”⁹⁴⁹ Globalization is the “telegraphic” name given to the process taking place in the world today. It is the new economic reality in which the capitalist system has developed. It is a much more sophisticated phase of its already old predecessor: the transnationalization of the economy, which was represented by the economic power of transnational corporations (TNCs). In the globalization process, the primacy of economics over politics seems to be accepted as the new rule of the game. This extremely complex process is, indeed, a two-edged sword (like the one appearing in Rev.19:15, the *romphaia oxeia*?). While it allows peoples and countries to communicate in real time and thus be part of a felt common reality, economically, it subjects the majority of the world’s population to the dictates of the powerful interests that dominate the world. In whose interests will the benefits be reaped?

Showing the disparities existing in this globalized world, Dutch economist, Robert van Drimmelen, argues that “the combined worth of the world’s 358 billionaires (US\$ 760 billion) is equal to the total combined annual income of the world’s poorest 2.5 billion people.”⁹⁵⁰ Enrique Dussel, Argentine philosopher and liberation theologian, argues that this new version of Moloch,

⁹⁴⁸ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 134.

⁹⁴⁹ Quoted in Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire. Reading Revelation Then and Now*, 237.

⁹⁵⁰ Robert Van Drimmelen, *Faith in a Global Economy: A Primer for Christians* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 15.

the “free market,” continues to demand human sacrifices and convincingly contends that the system operates under what he calls “the Babylonian principle,” that is, the order of oppression.⁹⁵¹ Interestingly enough, Babylon is precisely the image *par excellence* to name the empire --Rome--in the book of Revelation.

Again, Bookchin claims that

[L]arge-scale market operations had colonized every aspect of social and personal life. The buyer-seller relationship--a relationship that lies at the very core of the market--became the all-pervasive substitute for human relationships at the most molecular level of social, indeed, personal life. To “buy cheaply” and “sell dearly” places the parties involved in the exchange process in an inherently antagonistic posture; they are potential rivals for each other’s goods. The commodity—as distinguished from the gift, which is meant to create alliances, foster association, and consolidate sociality—leads to rivalry, dissociation, and asociality.⁹⁵²

On November 4-5, 2005, in the city of Mar del Plata, Argentina, and previous to the summit meeting of the presidents and prime ministers of the countries of the Americas, a strong popular protest took place. That is, representatives of the civil society, human rights organizations, and other popular organizations rallied there to express their rejection in the strongest terms to the USA-promoted initiative known as the “Free Trade Area for the Americas” (FTAA). The “empire” of the north seemed to have new proposals to continue its presence in and economic domination of the “neocolonies” of the “global south”. Joseph Nye, Dean of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, wrote in the *Washington Post*: “The military victory in Iraq seems to

⁹⁵¹ Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and Community* (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 1988), 31.

⁹⁵² Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 135.

have confirmed a new world order. Not since Rome has one nation loomed so large above the others. Indeed the word ‘empire’ has come out of the closet.”⁹⁵³

As the economy was a fundamental dimension of the Roman Empire, it quite apparently plays a relevant role in Revelation, particularly in chapter 18 but, by no means, is confined there. According to French scholar, Pierre Prigent, in Rev 18 “we have here the only allusion in the entire NT to the important commercial trade carried out in the empire.”⁹⁵⁴ Earlier in the text, at the time in which the Lamb opened the seven seals (6:1), “what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures” is heard, and the rider on the black horse “held a pair of scales in his hand” (*echôn tsugon en tê cheiri autou*) (6: 5b). Many scholars are of the opinion that this text makes a reference to the economic situation of the masses in the Roman Empire. Commenting on the rider of the black horse of Rev.6:6, Catherine Keller, argues that “The black horse rides for hunger, famine, and economic injustice: the balance and the voice conveys the inflation cost of the necessities (the *denarius* was a farm laborer’s day wage, cf. Matthew 20:2) and the protection of luxury items for the elite (olive oil and wine), images that lampoon Roman agricultural policies, their early version of ‘free trade’ with the colonized, also, scales signified justice.”⁹⁵⁵ Furthermore, *economics* and *ecology* show here their

⁹⁵³ 25 May 2003.

⁹⁵⁴ Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, trans. Wendy Pradels (Tuebingen: J.C.B Mohr, 2001), 502.

⁹⁵⁵ Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World*, 54. On the scales and justice, it is interesting to note Bookchin’s comments in *Toward an Ecological Society*, 66, where he argues that “Yet the even harsher fact must be faced that this system has to be undone and replaced by a society that will restore the balance between human society and nature – an ecological society that must first begin by removing the billfold from Justitia’s eyes and replace the

close interrelationship, particularly on Rev. 6:8. The fourth rider, Death, in a pale green horse, follows upon the heels of his predecessor and a fourth of the earth is destroyed. In this context, Keller—resembling the thinking of Bookchin-- insightfully observes that “[E]cological disturbance is understood as an *effect* of systemic injustice...The violence of nature begins only here to follow upon the heels of *manmade* violence.”⁹⁵⁶ On this matter, Bookchin argues,

our mental, and later our factual, dissociation of society from nature rests on a barbarous objectification of human beings into means of production and targets of domination – an objectification we have projected upon the entire world of life... But society has become so irrational and its diet of slaughter so massive that no law – social or ecological– is honored by any of its enterprises.⁹⁵⁷

Elsewhere, he writes “[T]he social can no longer be separated from the ecological any more than humanity can be separated from nature.”⁹⁵⁸

The seventh principle of social ecology/ecojustice speaks about the correlation between the exploitation of humans by humans and the exploitation of nature.

inequality of equals by the equality of unequals.” Furthermore, in the “Conclusion: Utopianism and Futurism,” significantly dedicated to Nicolo Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, leaders of the workers and martyrs for the cause of justice, Bookchin ends his book in this way: “Without recovering an ecological relationship with the biosphere and profoundly altering our sensibilities toward the natural world, our hope of achieving an ecological society regresses to a merely futuristic ‘scenario’...Equally significant, we must renew our relationship to each other in a rich nexus of solidarity and love, one that ends all hierarchical and domineering relationships in our species... In a society that has made survival, adaptation, and co-existence a mode of domination and annihilation, there can be no compromises with contradictions – only their total resolution in a new ecological society or the inevitability of hopeless surrender.” Ibid., 285-286.

⁹⁵⁶ Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 54.

⁹⁵⁷ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 316.

⁹⁵⁸ Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism*, 47.

Furthermore, and in recognition of the text, Keller adds: “Really, how much better have other prescientific texts done at depicting social practices and environmental consequences that *must* stop, but that they cannot stop?”⁹⁵⁹ Ricardo Foulkes, professor at the Biblical University of San José, Costa Rica, reviews the economic situation of those living at the end of the first century C.E. He argues that inflation, particularly hits in a stronger manner the poor and the destitute, and calculates that a quart of wheat underwent at that time one hundred per cent rate of inflation, while barley merely (!) eighty per cent, and adds “obviously, the survival of ‘those who are under’ is threatened.”⁹⁶⁰ Foulkes makes a reference to the fact that “while the Asian landholders and the privileged ones in the capital city struggle to gain greater economic advantages, the worker and his [*sic*] family lack the basic food.”⁹⁶¹ Basically on the same wavelength, Schuessler-Fiorenza adds a slight spin to this statement

[O]nly the provincial elite and the Italian immigrants, however, especially the shipowners and merchants, were reaping the wealth of the empire’s prosperity in Asia Minor, whereas a heavy burden of taxation impoverished the real majority of the provincial population. Thus a relatively small minority of the Asian cities benefited from the international commerce of the Roman Empire while the masses of the urban population mostly lived in dire poverty or slavery (18:13)⁹⁶²

⁹⁵⁹ Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 55.

⁹⁶⁰ Ricardo Foulkes, *El Apocalipsis de San Juan: Una lectura desde América Latina* (Buenos Aires / Grand Rapids: Nueva Creación and William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1989), 76. English translation is mine. Pierre Prigent, in his *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, 269, citing Cicero’s *Verrine Orationes* 3.81, concludes by stating that the price put forward by our text represents sixteen times the minimum price and eight times the maximum price allowed in Sicily in the first century B.C.E.

⁹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁹⁶² Schuessler-Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 100.

In her view, this small minority were the provincial magistrates and the oligarchies, whose interests were in connivance with those who dominated economically and politically the central metropolis of the empire, Rome.⁹⁶³ The reason for her comment lies precisely on the fact, that, in her opinion, “[T]he author of Revelation sides with the poor and the oppressed majority.”⁹⁶⁴ The second principle of ecojustice/social ecology underlines the preferential option for the poor and the marginalized, and it is social ecologist Eduardo Gudynas, who --influenced by liberation theology-- puts forward clearly this fundamental evangelical option.

The shipowners (*kybernêtês*) (18:17b; 18:19b (*pantes hoi echontes ta ploia en tê thalassê*), literally, “all who had ships at sea) and the merchants (*emporoi*) (18:3c; 18:11; 18:15; and 18:23b) are two categories of people playing a conspicuous economic role in chapter 18. Economics is particularly noticeable here, where the fall of Babylon/Rome is announced. Scholars agree that Ezekiel 27 constitutes a primary intertext for this chapter.⁹⁶⁵ According to Adela Yarbro Collins, this section “...is unique in the book as a whole in the extent to which narrative report and description are overshadowed by sayings.”⁹⁶⁶ The text forms part of a larger unity that starts in chapter 15 with the vision of the seven angels with the seven plagues (*angelos hepta*

⁹⁶³ A phenomenon that is repeated in the many “independence movements” from Spain and Portugal in the early XIXth century in Latin America, and after World War II in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. With few exceptions, sectors of the *intelligentsia*, together with a national (*creole*) and incipient economic *bourgeoisie*, profits from their privileged position, even if it only means partaking the rest of the “lion’s share,” that is, the relatively few crumbs that fall from the table of the empire.

⁹⁶⁴ Ibid., 100.

⁹⁶⁵ See, for instance, Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 338-383; Pringent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 502-510. Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, 172, provide a full table (16) of “echoes” of the Hebrew Bible in this passage.

⁹⁶⁶ Adela Yarbro Collins, “Revelation 18: Taunt-Song or Dirge?” in *L’Apocalypse johannique et l’apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament*, ed. J. Lambrecht (Gembloux: J. Duculot, 1980), 197.

echontas plêgas hepta) (Rev. 15:1, 6). It continues in chapter 17 in what Collins calls “the Babylon appendix,”⁹⁶⁷ that continues to chapter 19:10. That is, chapter 19 represents a kind of counterpart to the earlier section. In the text, Rome is renamed Babylon. Babylon was the center of a powerful former empire which subjected Israel, and took part of its people into captivity (14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2).

Aelius Aristides wrote his famous *Oratio*, a laudatory speech delivered before the imperial court, probably in 155 C.E. A resident of Smyrna (one of the cities addressed by the seer), his speech includes a revealing paragraph:

Here is brought from every land and sea all the crops of the seasons and the produce of each land, river, lake, as well as of the arts of the Greeks and barbarians... So many merchant ships arrive here, conveying every kind of goods from every people every hour and every day. So that the city is like a factory common to the whole earth. It is possible to see so many cargoes from India and even from Arabia Felix, if you wish, that one imagines that for the future, the trees are left bare for the people there and that they must come here to beg for their own produce if they need anything. Again there can be seen clothing from Babylon and ornaments from the barbarian world beyond... Your farmlands are Egypt, Syria and all of Africa which is cultivated. The arrivals and departures of the ships never stop... So, everything comes together here, trade, seafaring, farming, the scouring of the mines, all the crafts that exist or have existed, all that is produced and grown...so that it is no easy to decide which has the greater superiority, the city in regard to present day cities or the empire in regard to empires which have gone before.⁹⁶⁸ (*Oratio* 26.11-13)

Some time later, the great-great grandchildren of those chased away, decimated, or assassinated by the legions of Vespasian and his son, Titus--the authors of the Talmud-- reminded their readers that out of the ten measures of wealth granted to the

⁹⁶⁷ Ibid., 188.

⁹⁶⁸ Quoted in Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 375-376. Bauckham, in turn, uses the English version of C. A. Behr, *The Complete Works of P. Aelius Aristides* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), Vol. 2.

world, Rome received nine!⁹⁶⁹ The center of the empire had the capacity to absorb most of the surrounding resources. There seems to be a centripetal and a centrifugal movement operating at the same time, but always for the benefit of the powerful.

Bauckham appropriately combines economics with religion, acknowledging that “for John, Rome’s economic exploitation and the corrupting influence of her state religion go hand in hand.”⁹⁷⁰ The imperial cult serves as a legitimizing force for the exploitation of the empire. Consequently, there is a close interrelation between economics, politics, and religious affairs. In the ancient world, these three dimensions constitute a wholeness, a totality, impossible to separate. Under the oppression of the centralized Empire, this type of wholeness may easily fall into totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and hegemony, a kind of organization that, among other things, does not leave space for differences and diversities. This is evidently not the idea of “wholeness” that social ecology proposes. Instead, it is a kind of counter-hegemonic, aberrant, opposite wholeness, one which precisely fosters and warrants differences and diversity in its fullness. Would the communities addressed by the Seer have the capacity and ability to be beacons of such a possibility? Were the *ekklēsiai* in Asia Minor actual or potential seeds for counterimperial organization?

Pablo Richard also argues that in 18:3, “the subjects of the sentences express the concentration of social power (the nations), political power (the kings) and

⁹⁶⁹ *Quiddushim* 49b.

⁹⁷⁰ *The Climax of Prophecy*, 348.

economic power (the merchants).”⁹⁷¹ Yes, indeed, there are the *panta ta ethnê*, the *hoi basileis tês gês* and the *emporoi tês gês*, they are there to show who are “in charge” of the situation, who are the masters that dominate and have the power in their hands. This is a power, which in turn, is a result of “the power of her luxury” (*ek tês dynameos tou strênuous autês eploutêsan*).⁹⁷² In the description of vs.11-13, John lists no fewer than twenty eight items of merchandise. Bauckham claims that it is “much the longest extant list of Roman imports to be found in the literature of the early empire,”⁹⁷³ and he makes a detailed comment on the “cargo” and of the likelihood of its alleged origin.⁹⁷⁴ The list reveals and unveils an implicit set of values

⁹⁷¹ Richard, *Apocalypsis: reconstrucción de la esperanza*, 216. (My translation).

⁹⁷² Note that a footnote in the NRSV translates “from the power of her luxury” and remarks that the word *dyunamis* (here translated as “power”) can also be rendered as “resources.” Furthermore, RSV translates it as “wealth of her wantonness” as does the translation of James Moffat (1922), while the King James Version prefers “abundance of her delicacies,” and *The New English Bible* (1961), favors “on her bloated wealth.” As far as the Latin and Latin-related languages, Jerome renders “*uirtute deliciarum*,” the traditional Castilian version of Bover and Cantera (1961) translates “*con la pujanza de su lujo*,” as does the French critical *Traduction oecuménique de la Bible* (TOB, 1988). The *Versión Latinoamericana* (1972) renders “*su lujo desenfrenado*,” as does the Spanish version of the Jerusalem Bible (1998). The popular version *Dios habla Hoy* (1966), prefers “*exagerado derroche*,” while the Reina and Valera (1995) uses “*con el poder de sus lujos sensuales*.” Perhaps the most curious of all translations is the paraphrase used by the recent Brazilian publication (2005, in Portuguese), the *Bíblia de Estudio NTLH*, which renders “*a custa das práticas sexuais sujas da prostituta*.” This is indeed a revealing panoply of “creative” translation, some of which confirm the old Italian dictum “*traduttore, traditore*.” In any case, it is interesting to note the intimate relationship that exists in the variety of forms of expression.

⁹⁷³ Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 350.

⁹⁷⁴ Based on comments of classical ancient writers such as Lucan, Pliny, Tacitus, Juvenal, Martial, Quintillian, Petronius, Strabo, Seneca, Suetonius, Seneca, Statius, Varro, Virgil and Josephus, Bauckham argues that these materials were examples of the excesses and extravagance of Rome’s rich and powerful minority and their luxurious and ostentatious fashions. The items are: gold (*xrysou*) and silver (*argirou*), coming mainly from Spain; precious stones (*jewels* in the NRSV) (*lithou timiou*) coming from India; pearls (*margaritôn*) from the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and India; fine linen (*buisinou*) from Egypt, Spain and Asia Minor; purple (*porphuras*) from Asia Minor; silk (*sêrikou*) from China, the only mention of silk in

-- gold comes first, followed by other commodities of lesser value, and human beings are last.

At the end of the list, “slaves and human lives” (*somatos kai psychas anthrôpôn*) are included. “*Sômata*”, literally, “bodies”, was the commonly used word to speak about slaves being traded. “Human lives” (literally, “souls of men”) is an expression found in Ezek 27:13 (“humans beings” in the NRSV), also probably meaning slaves. Richard thinks that perhaps it may refer to women and men sent to the circus or to brothels.⁹⁷⁵ “By mentioning slaves at the end of the list”--Bruce Metzger argues--“John intends a climax: the essential inhumanity of Rome’s exploitation of the empire clearly reveals itself by the constant flow of slaves from the provinces to the city of Rome. By John’s time, slaves made up almost half of the

the whole Bible; scarlet (*kokkinou*) from Asia Minor; all kinds of citrus [*scented*, in the NRSV] woods (*pan tsylon thuinon*) from northern Africa, mainly Morocco; articles of ivory (*pan skeuos elephanton*) from elephants from Syria, India, and Africa; articles of costly wood (*pan skeuos ek tsylou timiôtatou*) from Africa and India; articles of bronze (*chalkou*) from Corinth and perhaps Spain; articles of iron (*sidêrou*) from Spain and Pontus; articles of marble (*marmarou*) from Africa, Egypt and Greece; cinnamon (*kinnamômon*) from south Asia via merchants from south Arabia; amomum (*spice* in NSRV) (*amômon*) from southern India; incense (*thymianata*); sweet-smelling ointment (*myrrh* in the NRSV) (*myron*) from Yemen and Somalia; frankincense (*libanon*) from southern Arabia; wine (*oinon*) from Sicily and Spain; olive oil (*elaion*) from Africa and Spain; fine flour (*choice* in NSRV) (*semidalis*) imported from Africa; wheat (*siton*) mainly from Africa and Egypt; cattle and sheep (*ktênê kai probata*); horses (*chypôn*) from Spain, Cappadocia, and Africa; chariots (*redôn*) from Gaul; and slaves and human lives (*sômatôn*, literally, “bodies,” *kai psujas anthrôpôn*), this last expression perhaps taken from Ezekiel 27:13, also meaning ‘slaves’, mainly from Asia Minor if they were not taken in wars. The text moves from the use of the genitive to the accusative and back. Bauckham ends the description saying that the list is very representative of Rome’s more expensive exports (352-366). Pierre Prigent, --perhaps one of those to whom Elizabeth Schuessler Fiorenza refers as “scientific” scholars whose way of reading is used to “deny the ideological character of its readings and mask its historical- social location and interests,” *Revelation*, 15-- does not see eye to eye with Bauckham’s understanding. He warns that “One must also carefully avoid transposing onto the book of Revelation the socio-political categories that underlie our modern judgments on the economic sphere, its activity and presuppositions.” *Commentary*, 55.

⁹⁷⁵ Richard, *Apocalypsis: reconstrucción de la esperanza*, 218.

population of the city.”⁹⁷⁶ Bauckman also uses a similar tone here: “It suggests the inhuman brutality, the contempt for human life, on which the whole of Rome’s prosperity and luxury rests.”⁹⁷⁷ Out of the depths, as it were, and out of his *apartheid* South Africa, Allan Boesak claims “[T]hey do not count; they are much less important than the splendid goods mentioned first....What the Bible wants is an economy where people matter, where there is justice and equity.”⁹⁷⁸

Nevertheless, the “wretched of the earth” finally are mentioned! In such a way the centralized power of the empire deals with the great majority of the people. That is, they are used either and then disposed of or they are just simply ignored, being made redundant. Because of their sheer numbers, they have, indeed, the right to be mentioned, or even before that, they have the right to be, *tout court*. Thus, the fundamental principle of the defense of life and of its integrity (Principle IV) is squarely ignored and considered irrelevant by the powerful empire.⁹⁷⁹

⁹⁷⁶ Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 86

⁹⁷⁷ Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 371.

⁹⁷⁸ Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective* 120.

⁹⁷⁹ The German poet and playwright, Bertoldt Brecht, tried to lift up these “buried” ones, who have been ignored by those who have written the “official” history:

Who built seven-gated Thebes?
Books list the names of kings,
Did kings haul the blocks and bricks?
And Babylon, destroyed so many times-
Who built her up so many times....
High Rome is full of victory arches
Who put them up? Whom did the Caesars triumph over?...
Young Alexander conquered India.
Just he?
Caesar beat the Gauls.

But not only the merchants cry, also the kings of the earth did before (18:10); and the shipmasters and seafarers, too (18:17-18). In all of them, John puts the same words, “*ouai, ouai, hê polis hê megalê*” (18:10b), and the words are followed by three different but complementary descriptions of the city/woman, and closes with the quick fashion in which all these things are going to happen: *hoti en mia ôra*.(18:10c). Moving away from a moralistic interpretation of wealth in the text, Yarbrow Collins, locating chapter 18 in the overall context of the book, states that “wealth is viewed primarily from a more social and political perspective in Revelation”⁹⁸⁰

In any case, as Bookchin and other social ecologists argue, the domination and exploitation of humans by humans is at the root of the domination of nature by humans, which emerged gradually (see further on this matter below). French scholar Maurice Godelier takes Bookchin’s basic assertion and reinforces the

Didn’t he at least have a cook with him?
Philip of Spain wept when his Armada went down.
Did no one else?
Frederick the Great won out in the Seven Years’ War.
Who won besides?
A victory on every page.
Who cooked the victory feast?
A great man every decade.
Who paid the bills?

Lots of facts.
Lots of questions.

Bertold Brecht, *Ausgewählte Gedichte*. Translated 1975 by David Johnson.

⁹⁸⁰ Yarbrow Collins, “Revelation 18: Taunt-Song or Dirge?,” 202.

idea when he claims that “everywhere appears a close link between the way nature is used and the way humans are used.”⁹⁸¹

Studying this passage, Argentinean scholar, Néstor Miguez, speaks of the existence of three axes of descriptive themes that, for him, express contradictory descriptions of the subjects. The first axis is power and greatness (*ischura, exousia megas*) (18: 8, 2, 10, 16, 18, 19, 21, 23). Miguez claims that the antithesis of this complex is formed by those who have been deprived of all power (slaughtered on earth) (v.24). This second axis he describes as power/victim. The third axis, the theme of wealth, portrays Babylon is rich (17a) and in its wake merchants and seafarers have grown rich as well. The catalog of luxury goods (v.12-13) should be included within this complex as well as the other catalog of goods denied (v.22-23) but in the contrary sense. In his words, “[T]he latter are elements related to everyday life, activities that give rise to the rejoicing and production that allow for human life.”⁹⁸² The axis here is: getting rich/being deprived.

In my reading of Miguez, I conclude that he is implicitly adhering to the principle of the defense of life and of its integrity in studying this text. It is trade, the “marketplace,” that reveals the homicidal character of Babylon. The accumulation of “her sins are heaped high as heaven” (*hai hamartia achri tou ouranou*) (18:5a)) is revealed in the accumulation of its luxury goods, which have in the end turned life itself into a product for trade. Miguez argues that “[I]f there is no trade, there is no life: this is the Babylonian creed. However,

⁹⁸¹ Maurice Godelier, *L’Idéal et le réel*. Cited in Deléage, *Historia de la Ecología*, p. 283.

⁹⁸² Néstor Miguez, “Apocalyptic and the Economy: A Reading of Revelation from the Perspective of Economic Exclusion,” 259.

when trade becomes the supreme authority, the fullness of life in its creative activity can no longer come to expression.”⁹⁸³ Accumulation without limits, quickly and at any cost seems to be the only *leitmotiv* that makes the wheels of the system (*basileia*) turn. This fact seems to be registered in the DNA of any exploitative economic system, with its devastating effects on the environment. Using an ecological metaphor, Bookchin argues that “one might more easily persuade a green plant to desist of photosynthesis than to ask the bourgeois economy to desist from capital accumulation.”⁹⁸⁴ Nevertheless, in a closed ecological system, everything has its price. Sooner or later, devastation and destruction of the earth will follow. For the author of Revelation, the beast is ecocidal, ruthlessly plunders and destroys, and, in so doing, may force people to be unwillingly removed from their environment and become beggars in the big cities or in the imperial capital, an exploited and cheap labor force in the metropolitan center.

And it is not only that, those who are responsible for devastation will not go unnoticed. The Seer also has harsh words for them. He recalls the seventh trumpet and the twenty-four elders who sing and give thanks for “destroying those who destroy the earth” (*kai diaphtheirai tous diaphtheirontas tēn gēn*) (11:18c). Today humans would not petition a divine being to do that. We know very well that a badly damaged earth will end up destroying not only those responsible for its devastation, but also every living species therein. Systems of this kind are doomed. They need to be drastically transformed for life to continue. Gudynas and Elvia argue that

⁹⁸³ Ibid., 260.

⁹⁸⁴ Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*, 66.

Social ecology must encourage those practices that give way to new styles of development, styles that do not consist in the accumulation of resources by the few or the consideration of human beings as mere resources to be used. Moreover, it should also consider that the resources must be used to benefit the majority, and not only the current ones, but also the future generations.⁹⁸⁵

In the jargon of the United Nations' technocrats, this is usually known as "sustainable development."

One of the angels of a particular dignity,--so Prigent--⁹⁸⁶ who "having great authority" (*echonta exousian megalên*) (18:1) (and John too?) viewing all that he sees, announces, without describing it, the fall of Babylon/Rome, as another angel has done in 14:8. This new heavenly being, like the prophets of old (Isa. 48:20; Jer 50:8; Jer. 51:6), does not hesitate to cry: "Come out of her my people, (*exelthate ho laos mou ex autês*) so that you do not take part in her sins, so that you do not share in her plagues" (18:4). Miguez again describes Babylon and its meaning as follows

Babylon is not just a city, imperial Rome, or the corrupt Jerusalem of the temple. It stands for whatever system enthrones the marketplace, elevating it to the status of a god and giving it the power to decide who lives and who dies. Babylon stands for whatever turns the human body and soul into merchandise for trade.⁹⁸⁷

But, if that is Rome, is there any other place where the people can really go? What are they to do? What are their realistic options--if any--in the complicated web of relations under Rome's control and dominion? Can they break away from the centralized power and gain greater autonomy and liberation? Can they stop buying the cargo (18:11)? Are they, to use Bookchin's words, in "need of direct democracy... for a high measure of self-sufficiency, for self-empowerment based on communal forms

⁹⁸⁵ Gudynas and Elvia, *La Praxis por la vida*, 100.

⁹⁸⁶ Prigent, *Commentary*, 502.

⁹⁸⁷ "Apocalyptic and the Economy," 261.

of social life – in short, the nonauthoritarian Commune?”⁹⁸⁸ Do we need voices and praxis which confront, challenge, and engage the question of political power, the “human scale” that the *sômatôn kai psychas anthrôpôn* (Rev. 18:13c) badly need? Bookchin speaks of “reempowerment” both in personal and public terms,⁹⁸⁹ thus creating libertarian institutions that, in his view, are *peopled* institutions, literally, and not metaphorically. These institutions are “...based on participation, involvement, and a sense of citizenship that stresses activity, not on the delegation of power and spectatorial politics.”⁹⁹⁰ How would the members of the “seven lampstands” hear and react to the call of the heavenly voice/ seer (18:4)? Howard-Brooke and Gwyther observe that “[T]o reject the “market” economy of empire would allow alternative modes of economic redistribution, one based on reciprocity and gift, not commodity exploitation,”⁹⁹¹ very akin to what the multitude gathered in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in November 2005, clearly expressed. Pablo Richard, in turn, claims that

[T]his coming out from Rome is not physical, but economic, social, political and spiritual; it has the sense of resistance, of no participation, of creating alternatives.... Come out from Rome means to confront it not on Rome’s terms or with Rome’s arms. The People of God struggles efficiently and historically against Rome, its arms are different and its efficiency superior (the double, in v.6)⁹⁹²

In the context of the New Jerusalem, Howard-Brook and Gwyther speak of an alternative counter imperial praxis, which involves “active resistance to empire and creative participation...Both this resistance to death and creative embrace of life were to be operative in the political, economic, and cultural spheres of the *ekklesiai* of

⁹⁸⁸ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 2.

⁹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁹⁹¹ Howard-Brooke and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, 176.

⁹⁹² Richard, *Apocalipsis*, 217.

Roman Asia.”⁹⁹³ Regrettably, they make no mention of the ecological dimensions that this new praxis would entail. However, they lift up the issue mentioned in the previous chapter of this dissertation discussing the apostle Paul. That is, the pivotal important role of the internationalization of the *ekklesiai* and their mutual support and relationships. The creation of a network (a Commune composed of communes, in Bookchin’s terminology?), they argue, “...was crucial to the ability of the followers of God and the Lamb to ‘come out’ of empire.”⁹⁹⁴ That is, of attempting to reconstruct a different order, one which support, promotes, and upholds life in its entirety.

The future is still open, because “a new heavens and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1) are part of the promise. The hands are ready to plough new lands in which to grow the new fruits of justice among peoples and among peoples and the earth. In Bookchin words, social ecology “is meant to express the *reconciliation* of nature and human society in a new ecological sensibility and a new ecological society – a reharmonization of nature and humanity through a reharmonization of human with human.”⁹⁹⁵ Among other things, for him, reharmonization and reconciliation entails the stopping of people’s economic exploitation, which is at the root of the exploitation of nature by humans and of the ensuing ecological devastation. Bookchin speaks of their close interrelations. Yes, there is a *reconstrucción de la esperanza*, which is not only possible, but badly needed.

Revelation and the hope for the future

⁹⁹³ Howard-Brooke and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, 192.

⁹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁹⁹⁵ *The Ecology of Freedom*, 11.

Quantum physics; Big Bang; DNA; Antropic principle; Boson of Higgs; Supernovas; Gliese 581c; Coret Exo-1b; Genetic engineering, Complexity and Chaos theories; GDP, GNP, HIV, H5N1.... These are some of the contemporary expressions currently used to refer to basic components of all matter, explanatory theories of the formation of the universe, new planets, or new developments in the search for understanding the depth and mystery of (both human and non human) life, economics, as well as the life-threatening new pandemias.

John, the seer, the writer of the book of Revelation, quite probably was unaware of such expressions and concepts. Perhaps he would be familiar, however, with certain ideas about *Gaia*, the classic name of the Earth goddess, the greatest of the pre-classical pantheon of gods of the Earth as used by the Greeks.⁹⁹⁶ Was the seer conscious or aware of this kind of *sutra*? Rasmussen reminds us that *Gaia* "...taps a forgotten awareness encoded in all religions and in most philosophies and cultures, an awareness perhaps even inscribed in the

⁹⁹⁶ Modern scientists have developed the so called "*Gaia hypothesis*" as a way to better understand the world around us. James Lovelock, British scientist and writer, in cooperation with biologist Lynn Margulis, developed this hypothesis. Lovelock argues that *Gaia*, "is the name of the Earth seen as a single physiological system, an entity that is alive at least to the extent that, like other living organisms, its chemistry and temperature are self-regulated at a state favorable for its inhabitants." See James Lovelock, *GAIA: The Practical Science of Planetary Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 11. The hypothesis is now a theory, "...which sees the evolution of organism as so closely coupled with the evolution of their physical and chemical environment that together they constitute a single evolutionary process, which is self-regulating." He adds "Thus, the climate, the composition of the rocks, the air, and the oceans, are not just given by geology, they are also the consequences of the presence of life." Ibid., 25.

unconscious of all of us, resident there in the form of primordial archetypes.”⁹⁹⁷

The first principle of social ecology/ecojustice expresses in a distinct manner a very similar concept. It speaks of the close interdependence between wholeness and diversity, reciprocity and complementarity. Describing Social Ecology, Clark speaks about “the basic principle of unity in organic diversity,” and argues that it “affirms that the well being of the whole can only be achieved through the rich individuality and the complex interaction of the parts.”⁹⁹⁸

Let us hear again another revealing paragraph from Aelius Aristides’ famous *Oratio*:

*Here is brought from every land and sea all crops of the seasons and the produce of each land, river, lake, as well as of the arts of the Greeks and barbarians...So many merchants ships arrive here, conveying every kind of goods from every people every hour and every day...It is possible to see so many cargoes from India and even from Arabia Felix if you wish, that one imagines that for the future the trees are left bare for the people there and that they must come here to beg for their own produce if they need anything.. Your farmlands are Egypt, Syria and all of Africa which is cultivated....*⁹⁹⁹

If Revelation is, indeed, a book designed to be read in constant intertextual relationship with the Hebrew Bible, how is it, then, that someone who is so knowledgeable of the Hebrew Bible, very likely a Palestinian Jew, who constantly uses and reinterprets Hebrew Bible texts, would have thought about the picture painted by Aristides? Most likely John was familiar with texts such as “They shall

⁹⁹⁷ Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 18.

⁹⁹⁸ “What is Social Ecology?,” *Trumpeter* 5:2 (1988): 72.

⁹⁹⁹ Quoted in Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 375-376. Italics are mine.

plant vineyards and eat their fruit... they shall not plant and another eat” (Is. 65:21-22); or “ I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground” (Hosea 2:18); or “ The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid ..., the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp... they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain” (Is. 11:6-9); or, the wise that “are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season and their leaves do not wither” (Psalm 1:3); or the text that inspired the crowning of his book, “there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month...their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing” (Ezek.47:1-12, particularly v.12). Or even the texts that recount YHWH’s promises to Noah (Gen. 8 and 9). What might one write to the seven churches about this powerful witness to God’s love and care for the earth and for its people? Can John embrace a more positive assessment of God’s creation, particularly, when it is known that apocalyptic writings--*inter alia*--are infused with the thought of the restoration of Eden on earth?

Revelation uses numerous images related to the earth, and, as such, potentially life giving images, such as waters and rivers, trees and leaves. These images need to be taken into consideration to rediscover the potential value of the “more than human” world and of its healing powers. John has made already a brief reference to the idea of the “Paradise of God” in what is sent to the angel of the church of Ephesus (Rev. 2:7). The idea will be taken up again at the end of his book. But before that, a description of the new heavens and the new earth and of the city where the new garden lies is needed.

The visions found in Revelation 21 and 22 are not necessarily a new literary creation of the Seer. They can be traced back to the Hebrew Bible, notably to the books of the prophets Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah.¹⁰⁰⁰ Notably in Is. 65:17; 66:22, where YHWH speaks as the one who creates and makes the “new heavens and the new earth.” Similarly, the idea of the “passing away of the first heaven and the first earth” (*ho gar protos uranos kai he prote ge apelthan kai he thalassa ouk estin eti*) (v.1b) can also be found in texts of the Hebrew Bible, such as Zephaniah and Isaiah, in Jewish apocalyptic literature and in early Christianity.¹⁰⁰¹

One should note that the expression “new” (*kainos, kaine*) appears three times in the first two verses. It is *kainos* and not *neos* which is the preferred word. The “new” mentioned here is something that reflects a totally new quality. Taking 21:5 to 22:5 as a unity, it textually describes and expresses this “newness” in at least five different ways, as Richard also appropriately describes.¹⁰⁰² “The sea is no more” (*hē thalassa ouk estin eti*) (21: 1); “death will be no more” (*ho thanatos ouk estai eti*) (21: 4a); “mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (*oute penthos oute kraugē oute ponos ouk estai eti*) (21:4b); “nothing accursed will be found there anymore” (*kai pan katathema ouk estai eti*) (22:3); and “there will be no night” (*nyx gar ouk estai ekei*) (21:25b and 22:52). This is a great message of hope for the hearers/readers, and shows that the book “is a profoundly hopeful and earth-healing book, culminating with a vision

¹⁰⁰⁰ See the detailed references in Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1121-1138.

¹⁰⁰¹ For additional information on this matter see Pringent, *Commentary*, 589f and Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1116ff., and the references to 1 Enoch; the Sibiline Oracles; Apoc. Elijah; 2Apoc. Baruch; Gk. Apoc. Ezra; the literature of Qumram; Mark 13 and par; 2 Peter; Justin’s 1 and 2 Apol.; The Gospel of Thomas; and the Apoc. of Peter.

¹⁰⁰² Richard, *Apocalypse: A People’s Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 160.

of life-giving water flowing from God's throne and a life-giving tree, providing fruit all year through."¹⁰⁰³

The text mentions that "the sea was no more" (*hê thalassa ouk estin eti*). Scholars claim that this idea also reflects an ancient Israelite tradition, which, according to Pringent, "is profoundly marked by the fears that the dangers of the sea inspire in a people of the land."¹⁰⁰⁴ Aune concurs with this opinion.¹⁰⁰⁵ The Romans not only built roads which communicated the center with the peripheral provinces, but they also controlled the maritime routes. The reference to the sea, can also point to the place from where the Romans also arrived, and if the sea was not possible, there was no option for the invaders to land. Moreover, there is still another way to look at this situation. Rossing argues that this mention is a critique of the shipping economy under Roman control, and that Revelation envisages a different, alternative economic vision, one which provides the essential elements for life, as water for all (21:6, 22:17),¹⁰⁰⁶ and not superfluous commodities for the selected few.¹⁰⁰⁷

Heavens and earth means the totality, the wholeness of God's good creation, of its integrity and value. It is God Godself that makes all things new (*kaina poio panta*) (v.5). This positive affirmation of heavens and earth is also a powerful

¹⁰⁰³ Rossing, "For the Healing of the World: Reading *Revelation* Ecologically," in *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, 165. Rossing's essay looks *prima facie* less nuanced than her previous works. It seems to lack shades of gray, almost no allusions are made to some of the contradictions, inconsistencies, tensions, and conflicting views in the text, as exemplified in the previous analysis of chapters 8 and 9.

¹⁰⁰⁴ *Commentary*, 592.

¹⁰⁰⁵ *Revelation 17-22*, 1120.

¹⁰⁰⁶ See the discussion on water in chapter 1 of this dissertation.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Rossing, *The Choice between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse*, particularly chapter 5.

invitation to take an ethical stand that allows people to be God's co-workers in the renewal of the world which God promises to all. In view of the ecological devastation and of the injustice among peoples, the building up of a new society and of a new person is both a call and a service. It becomes a human vocation to participate in the creation of a just and humane world, a world in which injustices are overcome and people and otherkind can forge mutually life-enhancing relationships.

Scholars Ross Kinsler and Gloria Kinsler, educators who spent most of their life in Central America, call attention to the high considerations that economic matters have in the text of the prophet Isaiah, particularly its chapter 65, one of the privileged inter-texts of Revelation. After the promise of the "new heaven and the new earth" (v.17) the people is described as being actively at work: "They shall build houses"... "they shall plant vineyards"(v.21)... "they shall not labor in vain." (v.23). The Kinslers speak of an alternative socioeconomic order of the Jubilee legislation, described poetically.¹⁰⁰⁸ I would like also to add the profound ecological dimensions that can be found in the ancient prophetic text, as validly remarked by Bauckham.¹⁰⁰⁹

Verse 2 brings in the new (*kainê*) city of Jerusalem, which is holy (*ἁγία*), and comes "down out of heaven from God." The theme of the city comes up again, and its image is not without contradictions, as alienation is rampant in any major urban settlement. The cities and urban communities are

¹⁰⁰⁸ Ross Kinsler and Gloria Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life: An Invitation to Personal, Ecclesial, and Social Transformation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999).

¹⁰⁰⁹ Bauckham, "Jesus and the Wild Animals," 16-17.

ecosystems created and maintained by human beings, with all its tensions and ambiguities, its remarkable achievements and its deep injustices and contradictions. Aune, referring to the New Jerusalem almost casually mentions an interesting piece of information, but he does not take the idea further. He recalls that the expression “Jerusalem the holy,” “occurs on silver shekels minted during the first Jewish revolt in 66-70.”¹⁰¹⁰ That was indeed a high time in the confrontation between the Jews and the Roman Empire, the occupying forces of the land. The revolt was inspired by a profound political desire for liberation. They needed to get rid of the invading force, which dominated the

¹⁰¹⁰ Ibid., 1121. Coins were a normal imperial vehicle to convey messages. Most of them carried the image of the emperor, with words describing their divine attributes. Notable among them is the depiction of the image of Octavian (Augustus) with the inscription *Caesar Divi* or *Divi Fili*. Chapter 13: 11-18, describes the “second beast.” Pablo Richard, *Apocalypsis*, 111, reminds his readers that elsewhere in the text, this beast is also referred to as “false prophet” (*pseudoprophètes*) (16:13b; 19:20a). They are defeated and both beasts are “thrown alive into a lake of fire that burns with sulfur,” where they share company now with the devil. While the first beast came out of the sea (13:2), the second comes from the earth, and seems to be less impressive than the first, as it has only two horns, instead of the ten of the first. While the first is said to have seven heads, there is no mention of the number of heads, for the second. But this beast has special characteristics. It has not only the capacity to “deceive the inhabitants of the earth” (v.14a), it can also give breath to the image of the beast, which, in turn, can kill those who refrain from worshipping it. Furthermore, it has an important economic component. The beast causes “all (*ta panta*) to be marked on the right hand (in their work, according to Richard) or, on the forehead (in their minds, according to Richard), so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name.” (v.16-17). This seems to be the only instance where all (*pantas*), “small and great, rich and poor” (*tous micros kai tous magalous, kai tous plousious kai tous ptôchous*), are described as subjected to the conditions imposed by the exploitative economic system of the centralized empire. Furthermore, Richard argues that “the whole chapter is a critical analysis of the Roman’s empire structure of oppression.” Ibid., 113. He convincingly develops the argument of how the writer captured the “ideological mechanism” of the image of the beast. Ibid., 115. He claims that the text describes that “money fetishized and becomes an active subject: it has spirit and life, and it speaks and kills.” Ibid., 116. Richard concludes that “as Christians reject the idolatry of the beast and of the money... [T]hey are sentenced to death economically by being excluded from the market, and they are sentenced to death politically, culturally, and spiritually for not acknowledging the beast as a god.” Ibid., 116.

land and the people, the main source of exploitation of both the people and the land, as explained earlier in the analysis of chapter 18. Therefore, “Jerusalem the holy” was not simply a “religious” expression, but was heavily loaded with liberationist political and social overtones, as “religion” and “politics” were not conceived as separated spheres of life. Both dimensions were intimately related, part and parcel of an encompassing wholeness. This issue of the coins is significant. It is to be remembered that around 71 C E to celebrate the conquest of Jerusalem, the Romans minted coins in bronze, silver and gold. These coins depicted a captive woman and carried the inscription *Judea capta*. It was a reminder of the fate of the rebellious colonies. The more profound meaning of this “battle of the coins” might have not gone unnoticed for our writer. Indeed it was part of the imperial propaganda, which aimed to let everyone know who is in charge. Revelation makes reference to the money and its importance for the functioning of the market.

The city is also called the bride (*nynphē*), and its richness is described in greater detail later in verses 11-27. It is to be noted that the richness of the city is shared by all. At one level of the *eco*, the economic one, Revelation presents interesting features. Howard-Brook and Gwyther, mention that the wealth of the New Jerusalem, “surpasses that of Solomon’s temple”...however, “the wealth of the city is used in communal ways--it lined the streets and gates and walls—repudiates the centralization of wealth under Solomon’s regime (2 Chron. 9). The wealth of New Jerusalem was gained by an altogether different economy.”¹⁰¹¹ Social Ecology’s claims on decentralization fit nicely into this

¹⁰¹¹ Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, 189.

perspective. Principle VI speaks of the critique of the centralization of power and of its consequences. All centralized power, be it political, social or economic, according to Bookchin, has devastating results, as the capacity to stifle people's creativity and libertarian initiatives is developed. He argues for "the need of direct democracy, for urban decentralization, for a high measure of self-sufficiency, for self empowerment based on communal forms of social life...."¹⁰¹² Is the New Jerusalem an expression of this kind of ecological society?

Furthermore, the fact that in the New Jerusalem there is no (central) temple (*kai naon ouk eidon en autē*) (21:22) may also point at least to two elements. One is the elimination of the centralization and accumulation of richness by the privileged religious elite, as the Temple collected tithes, sacrifices, and offerings from the people and the pilgrims. The other may be a democratized expression of religious life without mediations and open to all, without hierarchies and domination. By hierarchy, Bookchin implies "the cultural, traditional and psychological systems of obedience and command, not merely the economic and political systems to which the terms, classes and State, most appropriately refer."¹⁰¹³ Moreover, hierarchy seems to be an encompassing reality that affects all aspects of life, and, historically, it "established itself not only objectively, in the real, workaday world, but also subjectively, in the

¹⁰¹² Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 2. A similar equation has been discussed in the analysis of the Gospel of Mark, represented there in the tension between the "small tradition" and the "great tradition" in Israel/Judea, as Richard Horsley convincingly argues.

¹⁰¹³ Ibid., 4.

individual unconscious.”¹⁰¹⁴ Bookchin adds that a society may eliminate social injustice, but that, in itself, does not necessarily mean achieving social freedom, because in his understanding, hierarchy, as such, threatens the very existence of social life. He argues that “we may eliminate classes and exploitation, but we will not be spare from the trammels of hierarchy and domination.”¹⁰¹⁵ Perhaps the absence of the temple may help people to become mature citizens and assume responsibilities in their own hands.

Moreover, God is presented as being with them. “I will be their God and they will be my children” (*kai esonai autō theos kai autos estai moi hyios*) (v. 7b). Tenderness is at the order of the day. In a vivid image, Miguez observes that “Gentle as a caring mother or a tender grandfather, God sits God’s children, hurt and bleeding from the dramatic oppression, in God’s lap, and comforts them.”¹⁰¹⁶ According to Rossing, “New Jerusalem invites us to imagine our world differently.”¹⁰¹⁷ This is a radical perspective, highlighting the need to go directly to the root of the problems. Bookchin argues that “we can no longer afford to do without utopian thinking. The crises are too serious and the possibilities too sweeping to be resolved by customary modes of thought –the very sensibility that produced these crises in the first place.”¹⁰¹⁸

However, the question is not only imaging the world differently, or interpreting it differently, as philosophers have done. The question is *making* it different, that is, changing what needs to be changed in order to make it a

¹⁰¹⁴ Ibid., 63.

¹⁰¹⁵ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰¹⁶ Miguez, “The Empire and the Precarious,”

¹⁰¹⁷ Rossing, “For the Healing of the World,” 172.

¹⁰¹⁸ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 41.

reality. And for that to happen, political organization is pivotal, as well as radical imagination and utopian thinking. The New Jerusalem is presented as the opposite of Babylon/Rome. I have already mentioned the table that Howard-Brook and Gwyther compiled as contrasts between these two cities. No less than twenty-eight opposites are mentioned.¹⁰¹⁹ The authors revise the biblical tradition on the city, and underline certain key elements that made of Jerusalem a unique symbol and place. It is the city where God and people live together. Its very architecture, with its gates always open (21:25), points to the different kind of city. In today's world, where walls of separation continue to be built to segregate people, the "open door policy" of the New Jerusalem is a reminder of the need to learn how to live together in justice and peace. Richard, using similar language that Bookchin, but with a clear religious perspective, argues that "[it] is a symbol of God's new universal community, the new people, the new society, the new humankind, the new historical project created by God in the new heaven and the new earth."¹⁰²⁰

On the other level of *eco*, the ecological, the New Jerusalem also shows particular characteristics. It is watered by the river of the water of life, which flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb (22:1) and runs through its midst.¹⁰²¹ Water, the river, and the tree(s) take central stage. Water -- the vital

¹⁰¹⁹ Howard-Brooke and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, 160.

¹⁰²⁰ *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 163.

¹⁰²¹ Argentine biblical scholar, Ariel Alvarez Valdés, summarizes the four basic lines of interpretation concerning the understanding of the New Jerusalem's vision in the history of the church. He uses two basic categories (material/spiritual; present/future) and their respective combinations. 1) *Future and material*: This view was championed by Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian. 2) *Future and spiritual*: developed by the great Alexandrians, Clement and Origen as well as Jerome and Augustine. 3) *Present and spiritual*: As realized eschatology, present in the Acts of

element for the existence of life, actually the element from which life as we know it, originated --coming from the very spring of the water of life, will be given freely to the thirsty (*egô tô dipsônti dôsô ek tês pêngês hydatos tês zôês dôrean*) (v.6). The text of Isaiah 55:1 should echo in the ears of the listeners/readers. Aune points out that The Odes of Solomon 30:1-3 carries a similar beautiful and hopeful text: "Fill for yourselves water from the living spring of the Lord, because it has been opened for you. And come all you thirsty and take a drink, and rest beside the spring of the Lord. Because it is pleasing and sparkling and perpetually pleases the self."¹⁰²² In a society where everything is bought and sold, everything-- even human beings which are transformed into commodities-- the announcement that water is given freely (*dôrean*) is a revolutionary one. It becomes dysfunctional. It is an aberrant proposition for the market and the empire. It goes against the grain of the (dis)organization of society, because in it, grace is unknown. To dare to suggest such a proposition means a disruption of the "normality" of society. French philosopher Jacques Derrida has a phity formulation that held together justice and grace. Without necessarily framing it into a traditional formulation of grace, his is indeed a deep theological truth. He claims that

Martyrs, in such narratives as the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas and in the Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne. 4) *Present and material*: As understood in the Montanist movement and other minority movements in Asia Minor and in more recent movements such as the Adventist and Jehovah's Witnesses and sectarian groups such as that of the late Jim Jones in Guyana. See "La Nueva Jerusalén del Apocalipsis: Historia de su interpretación," *Revista Bíblica*, Año 66, 3/4 (2004): 173-194. In certain ways, this description is similar to the one found already in the Hebrew Bible and in the intertestamental literature and later Judaism. On this matter, see Mathias Rissi, *The Future of the World*, 45-51.

¹⁰²² *Revelation 17-22*, 1127.

The gift is precisely, and this is what it has in common with justice, something that cannot be reappropriated. A gift is something which never appears as such and is never equal to gratitude, to commerce, to compensation, to reward. When a gift is given, first of all, no gratitude can be proportionate to it. A gift is something you cannot be thankful for. As soon as I say “thank you” for a gift, I start canceling the gift, I start destroying the gift, by proposing an equivalence, that is, a circle which encircles the gift in a movement of reappropriation.¹⁰²³

And, who are those who cannot afford to pay for the basic necessities of life?

Those who are the addressees of the gift? They are the masses of the poor, the marginalized, the destitute, the slaves. Yes, Revelation assumes their perspective, and privileges them.¹⁰²⁴

Yes, through the middle of the street of the city flows the river of life (*hudatos xoes*) (22:1a). This is again a well-known image that appears in the Hebrew Bible, particularly associated here with Ezek. 47:1-12, Gen 2:8-10, and Zech 14:8. The other figure that appears immediately is that of the tree of life (one or several? as it (they) is/are on “either side of the river” (*tou potamou enteuthen*) (22:2b), although the noun is in singular (*xylon zôês*). Is it the only tree saved from the ruthless devastation of the tropical forests and from the unforgivable logging? No, this tree is “the fruit of the righteous” (Prov. 11:30).

¹⁰²³ Jacques Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable,” in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*. John D. Caputo, ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 18. Cited in Moore, “Mark and Empire,” 148.

¹⁰²⁴ The Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in February 2006, passed a statement against the privatization of water, and underlined the importance of making water accessible to all people of the world. It argues that water has more than economic meaning. It has social, cultural, medical, religious, and mystical values, according to the document. See full statement in www.wcc-assembly.info/en/theme-issues/assembly-documents/1statements-documents-adopted/internationalaffairsreport. 25 March 2006. It is also worth noting that the IV World Forum on Water took place in Mexico, in March 2006. The United Nations’ Report to that forum says that 1.100 million people in the world lack potable water and that 2.600 million people lack basic sanitation. Should they have access to it, no fewer than 1.6 million lives could be saved. See www.Clarin.com, March 3, 2006. The principle of the dignity and of the defense of life becomes relevant indeed.

It is the result of justice. Injustice and exploitation among people, as social ecology reminds us, is at the root of the ecological injustice. And when justice among people is possible, then, the tree of life (*xylon xôễs*) becomes also the tree of justice. The tree of life is a beautiful image of life abundant, bountiful, generous, and plentiful “with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month” (*poioun karpous dōdeka kata mēna ekaston*) (2b), not as the ones left bare by the exploitative work of the Empire. While producing the year around, its leaves are “for the healing of the nations” (*kai ta phulla tou xylou eis therapeian tōn ethnōn*) (22: 2c). The allusion to Ezek 47 prompts the following comment from Aune: “Miraculous fecundity is often associated with the eschaton.”¹⁰²⁵ This tree has therapeutic characteristics. It can cure the brokenness and the brokenhearted, those who have suffered under the merciless conditions imposed by the empire, and to those who just survive under oppressive conditions today. Every time that justice is brought to people and the earth, that is a healing leaf from the tree of life. The tree of life is an ecumenical symbol *par excellence*, present in most religions’ stories and myths.¹⁰²⁶ In the Hebrew Bible again, the “just,” those who perform acts of justice and mercy, are “like trees planted by the streams of water, which yield their fruits in its seasons” (Psalm 1:3). In John’s New Jerusalem, however, the tree is generously fruitful all the time. For social ecologists, particularly Gudynas and the Latin American school, the primacy of life is underscored again and again. The tree of Life, of life in its fullness, is an adequate metaphor to express such concern.

¹⁰²⁵ Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1178.

¹⁰²⁶ Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethic*, 195-219, includes two remarkable chapters on the meaning of trees.

A tree in the city is also an image not without ambiguity. It is, indeed, different from the image of the garden of Eden, where the Tree of Life finds its proper place. In a city, the presence of the tree denotes the intermingling of nature and culture and of human beings as mediators. A tree in the city is somehow a symbol of tensions and contradictions, but still remains a powerful symbol of life. This idea is convincingly expressed in the poem written by French composers Catherine and Maxime Le Forestier. In it, the human and the tree are intertwined, intermingled, fused and (con)fused together. There do not seem to be clear boundaries between them, but the purpose is to be there to continue to affirm life, and affirm it against all odds:

*Comme un arbre dans la ville
 Je suis né dans le béton
 Coincé entre deux maisons
 Sans abri sans domicile...
 Comme un arbre dans la ville
 ...Entre béton et bitume
 Pour pousser je me débats
 Mais mes branches volent bas
 Si près des autos qui fument
 Entre béton et bitume*

*Comme un arbre dans la ville
 J'ai la fumée des usines
 Pour prison et mes racines
 On les recouvre de grilles
 ...Comme un arbre dans la ville
 Entre béton et bitume
 On m'arrachera des rues
 Pour bâtir ou j'ai vécu
 Des parkings d'honneur posthume
 Entre béton et bitume
 Comme un arbre dans la ville
 Ami fais après ma mort
 Barricades de mon corps
 Et du feu de mes brindilles
 Comme un arbre dans la ville.¹⁰²⁷*

¹⁰²⁷ Maxime Le Forestier, "Comme un arbre," in *Essentielles* (Paris : Editions Coincidences, July 1972). CD Sacem.

Yes, resisting, persisting, fighting, and struggling even to death (Rev.2:10) and after death, as well, the body becomes a barricade, the twigs are lighted to ignite and give strength to the protest, to the struggle for life that never ends, not even with death. Revelation, claims Miguez, “is the affirmation of human life. The final vision is not a world of angels, but a city peopled by all peoples... [it] is not only a vision of a distant paradise, but a projection of human life when it becomes what it is meant to be...For apocalyptic faith is the freedom to think differently, to dream differently, to act differently, and to live differently; to rejoice not in power, but in life.”¹⁰²⁸ To act and live in the *hic et nunc* of the present social and economic imperial system, is to help it—in Bookchin words-- to “undergo revolutionary changes,,, far reaching in character that humanity will totally transforms its social relations....”¹⁰²⁹

The Seer sees a “new heaven and a new earth” (Rev.21:1). “Redemption”-- argues Rasmussen-- “means reclaiming broken or despoiled or unfinished creation *for life*”. And it is in this context that he brings John into the picture: “Such is the notion of this story [the earth’s]. Even the most apocalyptic writings understand this, like John of Patmos himself, as a radical transformation of the created order and not its utter obliteration in favor of realms literally out of this world.”¹⁰³⁰

All things (*ta panta*), are being made new including the earth (Rev. 21:5). In Revelation, all creatures praise God (4: 8), again, the entire order praises God (5:13-14), while the “destroyers of the earth” (Babylon, that is, the imperial Rome) are explicitly denounced (11:18).

¹⁰²⁸ “The Empire and the Precarious: The Relevance of an Apocalyptic Faith.”

¹⁰²⁹ *The Ecology of Freedom*, 49.

¹⁰³⁰ Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* 256.

The new earth is now the New Jerusalem, a city which is at the same time a garden, and which "... is not a vision of rural idyll or primordial bliss. Rather, it is a vision of the "greening" of the city."¹⁰³¹ Pablo Richard adds his dose of particular care for the humans: "The rebuilding of the city is fundamentally a rebuilding of the collective consciousness of the people of God that is reading and hearing Revelation"¹⁰³² It is a consciousness expressed also in poetic language, because humans are also "poets" in and with the rest of creation. A quasi-contemporary of John, the unknown author of the Sibylline Oracles claims:

And then shall there be peace and wisdom deep,
And the fruit-bearing land shall yield again
Abundant fruits, divided not in parts
Not yet enslaved. And every harbor then,
And every heaven, shall be free to men.... 2:31-35

For all mother earth shall yield
To mortals best fruits boundless, wheat, wine, oil;
And also from heaven a delightful drink
Of honey sweet, and trees shall give their fruit,
And fatted sheep and cattle there shall be,
Young lambs and kids of goats; earth shall break forth
With sweet springs of white milk; and of good things
The cities shall be full and fat the fields....

Nor shall war longer be on earth, nor drought,
Nor famine, nor the fruit-destroying hail.¹⁰³³

Almost eight centuries ago, a saint who decided to become poor, expressed himself with the following praises:

All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that your have made,

¹⁰³¹ Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, 189 ff.
¹⁰³² Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 165.
¹⁰³³ 3: 928-935, 938-39.

and first my Lord Brother Sun,
who brings the day: and light you give to us through him.
How beautiful he is, how radiant in all his splendor.
Of you, most high, he bears the likeness.

And praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Moon
and stars. In the heavens you have made them
bright, precious and fair.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through sister Earth,
our mother, who feeds us in her sovereignty and
produces fruits and colored flowers and herbs.¹⁰³⁴

John the Seer, invites us all to look once again to the text, and, in so doing,
“we should not be surprised to find an alternative perspective regarding nature
in this subversive text.”¹⁰³⁵ And not only regarding nature, an alternative
perspective can also be found regarding people and their social and political
responsibilities and relations.

Another more modern text, the one which included the letter of the
Ecumenical Group to the Churches, also brings the closing words with which
Leonardo Boff ended his speech at the gathering in Brazil: “For the new
heavens and the new earth, new men and women must be created. We must
bring about new people in a new covenant with creation, venerated and
restored. For this creation is the temple of God.”¹⁰³⁶

¹⁰³⁴ St. Francis of Assisi.

¹⁰³⁵ Reid, “Setting aside the Ladder to Heaven: Revelation 21:1-22:5 from the
Perspective of the Earth,” 242.

¹⁰³⁶ Granberg-Michaelson, *Redeeming the Creation---The Rio Earth Summit:
Challenges for the Churches*, 58.

CONCLUSIONS

Liberating readings is part of the title of this dissertation. They are an attempt to respond to the challenge raised by the ecumenical delegation at the preparatory meeting of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also called the “Earth Summit,” held in the city of Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. They boldly claimed: “Re-read the Bible and reinterpret our traditions in light of the ecological crisis.”¹⁰³⁷ Liberating readings can be significant if they enable people to create conditions for life in community, having justice as its foundation and mutually sustaining relationships among them and with the rest of creation. In the light of the current ecological predicament (the time of the post-Kyoto protocol and Copenhagen) people look for resources to be able to intentionally take action in a responsible and effective way. The crisis we are going through has been described not only as ecological, social, political, and economic crisis, but fundamentally as a deep crisis of values. The human community needs, above all, to develop a radically new paradigm to be able to face the future with confidence and hope. What is needed is “new wine into fresh wineskins.” (Mark 2:22b).¹⁰³⁸

¹⁰³⁷ Granberg-Michaelson, *Redeeming the Creation*, 80.

¹⁰³⁸ Note the plea in the Statement from the World Council of Churches to the High-Level Ministerial Segment of the 13th Session of the Conference of the Parties (COP13) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 3rd Session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP3). The statement is entitled *This far and no further: Act fast and act now!* It was delivered in Bali, Indonesia, on December 14, 2007. It states, *inter alia* that “A change in paradigm appears as mandatory in the prevailing economic strategy of promoting endless growth and consumption of goods and a seemingly insatiable level of consumption among the high-consuming sectors of our societies... Societies must shift to a new

At this crucial moment, where the very existence of life is at stake, the new paradigm should be centered in the defense of the integrity of life, particularly of the lives of the most vulnerable creatures on earth, namely, the poor. Christians and people of good will need to work together to create radically new conditions-- social, political, ecological, cultural, spiritual, etc.—which would allow the development of life in all its fullness (John 10:10). In a comprehensive understanding of the reality, it is of the essence to eradicate exploitative and destructive structural relations among people and between people and nature, and to establish relationships of justice. In the light of the groaning of the whole creation, and of the suffering of the millions of innocent people, nothing less than radical questioning of the prevailing socioeconomic system is required. This generation cannot ignore the challenge. Discussing the responsibility of people to be effective builders of righteousness and peace-- both Christians and non Christians alike-- Argentinean scholar, José Miguez Bonino, reminds his readers that “[E]very generation, therefore, is at the same time ...the bearer of sacrifice and the inheritor of hope, called to realize as fully as possible all the human possibilities open to it (politically, socially, economically, spiritually) and called to suffer and to toil for new and greater

paradigm where the operative principles are ethics, justice, equity, solidarity, human development and environmental conservation. In our traditions, we believe that the earth was entrusted to us but we simply cannot do whatever we want with it. We cannot make use of nature using it only as a commodity. We must bear in mind that our liberty does not allow us to destroy that which sustains life on our planet.” See *Climate Change and the World Council of Churches, Recent Statements*. Mimeograph publication, WCC, Geneva, April 2009. It can also be found in <http://oikumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-/programmes/justice-diakonia-and-responsibility-for-creation/climate-change-water-14/12/07-statement-to-cop13-un-climate-conference-bali.html>. February 12, 2010. See also Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 9-15.

possibilities for future generations.”¹⁰³⁹ The Sermon of the Mount calls blessed (*makarioi*) to those who hunger and thirst for justice (Matthew 5:6).

Traditionally, the Bible has been for people of faith a resource of inspiration and liberation. Despite its ambiguities and ambivalences, and its historic misuse in the hands of the powerful, the colonizers or the conquerors, the biblical texts can still be a source for change and commitment. It goes without saying that biblical texts are not ready-made solutions to the problems of our time. Rather, as Mesters argues, “[The Bible] is a source of commitment to the oppressed, it is a source of the resurrection and liberation of human life.”¹⁰⁴⁰

The significant contributions of both ecojustice scholars and social ecologists in this context help to shed additional light to the ancient biblical texts. The eight principles develop in chapter two of this study contribute to see the texts from a different perspective, and eventually to enlarge the field of their significance. Furthermore, one can see the striking coincidences between the reports studied in chapter one (Club of Rome, Brandt, Bruntland) and the main tenets of social ecology and findings of ecojustice theologians. They highlight the close interconnectedness of the issues discussed and point to a holistic understanding of reality. The principles also permit to read the biblical texts and find in them an understanding of reality that takes into account human beings and the more-than-human as an interconnected whole, underlying the cosmic dimension of their message.

¹⁰³⁹ José Miguez Bonino, *Christians and Marxists: The Mutual Challenge to Revolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 130.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Mesters, *Defenseless Flower*, 80.

In the texts studied, one can find a golden thread which runs through them, and this golden thread is “hope.” In Mark, the wilderness--the first “home” for Jesus in the narrative-- is, as Loader claims, the “vestibule of hope.”¹⁰⁴¹ The fundamental message of Jesus is the coming of the Kingdom, which is both a reality and a promise. As a reality it is already full of hope, as it brings about extraordinary and superabundant gifts, particularly for those who suffer or are marginalized: the sick are cured (Mark 1:34); the possessed are freed and the occupying forces symbolically punished (5:1-20); children are given new possibilities to live (Mark 5:42); the hungry are fed (8:1-9), and the weak are privileged (9:33-37). As a promise, it grows and grows, and people do not even notice it, until the grain is ripe (4:26-29). The kingdom is hope for the hopeless and justice for the downtrodden. It encompasses all aspects of life, as all dimensions are affected by its presence/coming. The kingdom of hope questions the present because it is not the final reality, as the present is impregnated with the future. In this sense, the utter radicality of the kingdom and its values challenge any human endeavour that is considered as final and definitive. Ruben Alves makes reference to the kingdom and claims that it does not evidence “a belief in the possibility of a perfect society but rather the belief in the nonnecessity of *this* imperfect order.”¹⁰⁴² This “*this*” can be repeated again and again every time that the order of society is at stake. This eschatological perspective is a constant challenge, even to social ecology and its profound concept of an ecological society.

In Romans 8, “hope”, together with “creation”, are the two words most often used. The very image used, the birthing, is full with hope for new life. Paul

¹⁰⁴¹ “Good News—for the Earth? Reflections on Mark 1:1-15,” in *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, 33.

¹⁰⁴² Ruben Alves, “Christian Realism: Ideology of the Establishment,” *Christianity and Crisis*, (September 17, 1973): 173f.

compares the present with the future, and confirms the hope for salvation and redemption, both of humanity and of the whole creation. The two realities are interconnected, mutually dependent, and linked in an inseparable way. The “children of God” (8:19, 21) are challenged to be a hopeful transforming agency for the renewal of the world. One could even hear the echo of the prophet Jeremiah, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future of hope” (Jer 29:11).

In the book of Revelation, the announcement of the vision of “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1) represents the hopeful culmination of the difficulties and tensions confronting the communities. Celia Deane-Drummond argues that “[T]he challenge for the apocalyptic writers was to encourage responsible action now...”¹⁰⁴³ The reconstruction of hope--to use the felicitous expression of Pablo Richard—is, therefore, possible, and the ensuing results are there to be enjoyed: water comes as a gift (21:6; 22: 17), “mourning and crying and pain will be no more,” (21:4), and the bountiful and generous tree of life will not only feed the people, but it will also heal them (22:2). It is a forceful affirmation of all life. Moltmann articulates eschatology, hope, and the ethical engagement when he convincingly argues that “Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present.”¹⁰⁴⁴

¹⁰⁴³ Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*, 177.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 16.

Deanne-Drummond makes reference to the fact that biblical eco-theology readings “may be used to highlight a particular apologetic for active environmental care—in other words—to provide a foundation for environmental ethics.”¹⁰⁴⁵ The readings attempted here are also intended to constitute a source of inspiration for specific social and political involvement. Both are closely interrelated, and the combination of ecojustice and social ecology provides the link.

It is hoped that the liberating readings offered in this study will help to avoid falling into two common temptations. The first is to avoid commitment and struggle for change, seeking refuge in an otherworldly and escapist understanding of the calling of the gospel message, the *euangelion*. The other common temptation is simply to give up hope, in view of the overwhelming and difficult realities that surround us. This temptation leads to despair, frustration, hopelessness, and futility. It is well attested in Dante Alighieri’s *The Divine Comedy*. In its first part, at the entrance of the *Inferno* (hell), there stand the words: “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.”¹⁰⁴⁶

On the contrary, the readings invite and encourage people to join forces and look forward to a better tomorrow, for the present generation, and for the children of the children of generations to come. This better tomorrow is possible. It will be a work of love and dedication in the building of a just, sustainable, and peaceful society in which human beings’ relations with nature

¹⁰⁴⁵ Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*, 81.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Chant 3, line 9: *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrate*. Actually, a more correct translation would read “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here,” as “*ogni*” (all) modifies hope.

will be mutually supportive in a full respect for the value of the whole created life. It will be indeed the total liberation of life.

In a mirror, dimly (I Cor. 13: 12a).

I have stated earlier that no hermeneutical lens is able to exhaust the manifold layers of meanings of the biblical texts. In other words, texts are not wholly and exhaustively interpreted by any set of principles that one can apply to them. The different possible readings explored both in the exegesis of the gospel of Mark, Romans, and in the book of Revelation show clearly how the texts can be interpreted sometimes in complementary, sometimes in dissimilar fashion. The text lends itself to a multiplicity of possible meanings. Furthermore, and following the insight of Hans-Ruedi Weber, the operation can be reversed and the texts can provide challenges to the lenses used to interpret it, showing at the same time its possibilities and limitations. It is evident that the hermeneutical principles employed in this study do not exhaust the meaning of the texts, while at the same time they are able to extract new meanings and shed new light in this time of ecological devastation and deep injustices in the world.

But one can also highlight the challenges coming from the texts from a theological standpoint. It is German theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who may help to provide another perspective on the issue. It is agreed that his committed participation in the German resistance movement was the cause of his turning his thoughts to the question of the “penultimate.” In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer reflects on the last things and the things before the

last, the ultimate and the penultimate, and of their relationships.¹⁰⁴⁷ While for him the ultimate is God's justification by grace, the penultimate is the realm of history, where the activities of human beings take place, and where historical mediations or historical projects are tried, with their inherent possibilities and limitations. This penultimate reality must be preserved for the sake of the ultimate, argues Bonhoeffer. Furthermore, he claims that "Jesus lets human reality exist as penultimate, neither making it self-sufficient nor destroying it—a penultimate that will be taken seriously and not seriously in its own way, a penultimate that has become the cover of the ultimate."¹⁰⁴⁸ Furthermore, and particularly relevant to the discussions pertaining ecological matters, Bonhoeffer considers "that the penultimate must be preserved for the sake of the ultimate. Arbitrary destruction of the penultimate seriously harms the ultimate... the penultimate, therefore, does not negate the freedom of the ultimate; instead, the freedom of the ultimate empowers the penultimate."¹⁰⁴⁹ Hope plays a fundamental role in the relationship. One has to admit that the very concept of hope remains a challenge for social ecology, particularly in its "Bookchinian" expression. It is not part of its vocabulary, but from the perspective of the texts studied, is an essential component in the commitment

¹⁰⁴⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 151ff. For him, "[T]he relationship between the ultimate and the penultimate is resolved only in Christ. In Jesus Christ," he says, "we believe in the God who became human, was crucified, and is risen. In the becoming human we recognize God's love toward God's creation, in the crucifixion God's judgement on all flesh, and in the resurrection God's purpose for a new world.... Jesus Christ the human being—that means that God enters into created reality, that we may be and should be human beings before God." (157).

¹⁰⁴⁸ Ibid., 158.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Ibid., 160.

to the struggle for life, and “for life in all its fullness.” It is the driving force in the “spirituality for combat.”

Human beings always act at the level of the penultimate, of the fragmentary. All human constructions, the “ecotopia” or the ecological society, *inter alia*, will still be human constructions and as such partial, non-final, limited and incomplete, in a word, penultimate. Indeed the building of a more just and humane society through concrete sociopolitical and ecological structures should, from a Christian perspective, be considered of pivotal importance for the “healing of the nations” and of all creation, and has its relation to the kingdom of God. In other words, these human activities carry with them eschatological significance (see Matt. 25:31-46), and therefore all these efforts become meaningful. In this light, I believe that José Miguez Bonino is right when he claims that “The kingdom is not the denial of history but the elimination of its corruptibility, its frustration, weakness, ambiguity—more deeply, its sin—in order to bring to full realization the true meaning of the communal life of man [sic].”¹⁰⁵⁰ In any case, the texts remind us that all these historical mediations still operate at the level of the penultimate. It is in this sense that the texts also present a challenge to social ecology. This particular understanding places all historical mediations in perspective and in tension with the ultimate gift, the moment in which “God may be all in all” (*ho theos panta en pasin*) (I Cor. 15:28). This insight tries to reflect a realistic anthropology. The Jewish philosopher, Hans Jonas reminded his readers that

¹⁰⁵⁰ Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, 142.

“men are men and not angels.”¹⁰⁵¹ This perception necessary entails a particular critical perspective, but this perspective can only be valid when it is done in, and comes from, the midst of the struggle, with one’s hands in the mud, so to speak, and not in the abstract. This perspective can be summed up in the idea of a “critical solidarity in the struggle.” The fight against all the forces which deshumanize life and destroy nature is a struggle for wholeness and for the well-being of the whole creation, and everyone is invited to join in. It is only in the midst of that struggle that one can point out to its limitations and fragility. This critique can only be based upon, as Miguez Bonino claims, “a very concrete number of prophetic criteria: justice to the poor and oppressed, protection of the weak, attention to those who suffer hunger, freedom to slaves and the suppressed.”¹⁰⁵² These prophetic criteria are part and parcel of the core values exposed by the kingdom of God; they are part of the expectation of creation, which “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19), and expect their full realization in the fundamental gift of God to all peoples on earth, the city that comes “down out of heaven” (Rev. 21:2), because God is “the God of the spirits of the prophets” (Rev. 22: 6).

¹⁰⁵¹ Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 160.

¹⁰⁵² Miguez Bonino, *Christians and Marxists*, 88.

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